Language Learning Strategies Employed by High and Low Language Proficiency University Students in a Thai Context
กลยุทธ์ในการเรียนภาษาของนักศึกษาที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาสูงและต่ำในมหาวิทยาลัยของไทย

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สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์
วิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้

Abstract

Since language learning strategies are the main factors that help language students learn a second or foreign language successfully, many studies have been conducted to examine which language learning strategies are mostly employed by language learners in different contexts. This mixed methods study examined the most and least language learning strategies employed by high and low language proficiency students in a university in Thailand and also determined how those students acquired those language learning strategies. The participants were high and low language proficiency students majoring in English for Communication major at Master University (pseudonym). To collect data, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire was employed. Then, they were analyzed by using descriptive statistics. From overall students, 17 students volunteered to participate in semi-structured interview. The finding of this study indicated that the high language proficiency students reported using metacognitive strategies the most to facilitate their own language learning while the low language proficiency students tended to sometimes use the metacognitive strategies. The present study also found that the participating students used cognitive strategies the least. Moreover, the high language proficiency students used overall language learning strategies more frequently than the low language proficiency students. The results of this study highlighted the essential of language learning strategies that would be essential to create a number of useful implications which finally can be used as a guideline to improve an educational situation and also to bridge the gap between EFL students' language learning strategies and teachers' teaching methodology.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies (LLS), High Language Proficiency Students,
Low Language Proficiency Students, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

บทคัดย่อ

　　　　กลยุทธ์ในการเรียนภาษาเป็นปัจจัยสำคัญที่ช่วยให้ผู้เรียนภาษาต่างประเทศประสบความสำเร็จในการเรียน งานวิจัยใน
หลายประเทศจึงถูกออกแบบมาเพื่อศึกษาว่าผู้เรียนมีกลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาอย่างไร งานวิจัยแบบผสมผสาน นี้จัดทำขึ้นเพื่อศึกษา
กลยุทธ์ในการเรียนภาษาของนักศึกษาที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาสูงและต่ำในมหาวิทยาลัยของไทย และศึกษาว่านักศึกษา
ทั้งสองกลุ่มมีการใช้กลยุทธ์ในการเรียนภาษาต่างหรือเหมือนกันอย่างไร เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูลในครั้งนี้ คือ แบบสอบถาม
ของ Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) เพื่อใช้ถามเกี่ยวกับการเลือกใช้กลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาของ
นักศึกษาซึ่งเป็นนักศึกษาสาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร มหาวิทยาลัยมาสเตอร์ (นามสมมติ) จากจำนวนนักศึกษาที่ทำ
แบบสอบถามทั้งหมด มีนักศึกษา จำนวน 17 คน สมัครใจให้สัมภาษณ์

　　　　ผลการวิจัยพบว่า นักศึกษาที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาสูงใช้กลยุทธ์ด้านอภิปัญญามากที่สุด นักศึกษาที่มี
ประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาต่ำใช้กลยุทธ์ด้านอภิปัญญาเป็นบางครั้ง นอกจากนี้งานวิจัยยังพบอีกว่านักศึกษาทั้งสองกลุ่มเลือกใช้
กลยุทธ์ด้านพุทธิปัญญาน้อยที่สุด ผลการวิจัยในภาพรวม พบว่า นักศึกษาที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาสูงมีการใช้กลยุทธ์การ
เรียนภาษาบ่อยกว่านักศึกษาที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาต่ำ งานวิจัยนี้ยังชี้ให้เห็นความสำคัญของกลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาซึ่ง
เป็นประโยชน์ในการปรับปรุงการเรียนการสอนภาษา อันเป็นสิ่งสำคัญในการเลือกใช้กลยุทธ์ในการเรียนของผู้เรียน และการเลือกใช้
วิธีการสอนของอาจารย์

คำสำคัญ: กลยุทธ์ในการเรียนภาษา　นักศึกษาที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาสูง
　　　　　　นักศึกษาที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาต่ำ　ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

　　　　Over the past few decades, there has been a significant shift in the field of language learning and teaching with the emphasizing on learner and learning rather than teacher and teaching (Gerami & Baighlou, 2011). In line with the shift of this interest, more attention on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research in how language learners acquired the strategies to achieve their main purposes of language learning and what strategies they employed to success in their learning has taken place in the field of foreign language learning. Therefore, Language Learning Strategies (LLS) which are steps in which language learners used to enhance their own learning play a vital role in language learning development. Many researchers in the field of second language acquisition have studied which language learning strategies mostly employed by language learners in different contexts.

　　　　In measuring learners' learning strategies, a questionnaire of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) designed by Oxford (1990) was popularly used in several contexts. For instance, Mochizuki (2016) conducted a study in Japan to examine the kinds of LLS Japanese university students used to achieve their English learning.

With her quantitative data gathered from an 80-item Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire, it found that Japanese students used compensation strategies the most and affective strategies the least to help them learn language.

　　　　Similarly, Gerami & Baighlou (2011) examined language learning strategies used by academically successful and unsuccessful Iranian students. Interestingly, the results revealed that the successful and unsuccessful students used different learning strategies. The unsuccessful students tended to use fewer kinds and surface levels of learning strategies such as cognitive and memory related. In contrast, the successful learners used wider ranges of learning strategies and deeper levels such as meta-cognitive strategies. However, the researchers argued that both successful and unsuccessful Iranian students use less affective and social learning strategies because in Iranian contexts lacked of English speaking environments.

　　　　More or less the same, Kiram, Sulaiman, Swanto & Din (2014) used SILL to examine the relationship between students' language learning strategies and their language proficiency levels. In data analysis, the researchers employed

Pearson's correlation coefficient, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient and t-test. The research found that in overall meta-cognitive strategies were the most preferred among the students. Moreover, there were no significant relationship between students' language proficiency levels and language learning strategies preferred except cognitive learning strategies. In other words, the more cognitive learning strategies were used, the better English proficiency the students had.

Castillion & Cordora (2014) also investigated kinds of language learning strategies that successful students preferred to use. The research was conducted in bilingual Mexican contexts where the students speak English and Spanish. The quantitative results revealed that successful and non-successful students significantly used different language learning strategies. In other words, the successful students used meta-learning strategies and cognitive learning strategies more frequently. However, based on the qualitative results, the researchers argued that it was too overgeneralize to affirm that successful and unsuccessful students always used different language learning strategies. Instead, some personal characteristics of learners and family background components tended to influence the students to achieve their learning outcomes. Such positive learners' characters were such as punctuality, time dedicating for studying, high- responsibility, and having parents or siblings as a successful role model.

Research Problems and Questions

The review of the aforementioned studies offered some insights into the significance of language learning strategies. However, more studies on this particular issue are still needed, as it seems rather shortsighted to conclude that what happens in one context may be the same as in other contexts. In other words, the results found in one particular context can little be generalized (Jacob, 1987). Language researchers in

particular are encouraged to study what language learning strategies EFL learners use to success in their language learning and how they use those strategies. In response to this, the researchers in this present study went into a Thai university to study what language learning strategies EFL Thai university students employed to use to accomplish in their language learning and how they used those language learning strategies.

In particular, two research questions helped frame the study. What are the most and least used categories of language learning strategies by Thai high and low language proficiency university students? And, how those high and low language proficiency university students acquire those language learning strategies?

Mode of Inquiry

To answer the research questions, we employed the concept of mixed methods methodology consisting of qualitative and quantitative research in our study (Caracelli & Greene, 1993; Cresswell, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Three data collection tools were used to gather the data in this present study. They were: (1) the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire by Oxford, (2) the English test as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and (3) semi-structured interview.

1. Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) Questionnaire

Oxford (1990) classified the language learning strategies into six categories. (1) *Cognitive learning strategies* often positively related to language proficiency. The cognitive learning strategies related to how learners directly elaborate language materials or activities through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, or outlining. (2) *Meta-cognitive strategies* could be used as a prediction for learners' learning achievements. This of learning strategies related to the ways learners reflect,

identify, and evaluate their own learning capacity and arrange activities to promote their own learning. (3) *Memory-related learning strategies* could help learners remember or link the target language with another which were usually in the forms of vocabulary or language structures. However, Oxford argued that this kind of learning strategies do not always positively related to language proficiency. (4) *Compensation learning strategies* helped learners to compensate the missing meaning in communication. Such learning strategies were such as guessing, substituting with synonyms, or using gestures. (5) *Affective learning strategies* related to learner's moods, anxiety levels in learning, or ways learners rewarded themselves after successfully accomplished the learning tasks. (6) *Social learning strategies* associated with the learning through interaction or cooperation with others. Learners preferred to use this kind of social learning strategies tended to ask questions and helps and like to learn other cultures.

The present study employed SILL questionnaire (Oxford, 1990) to identify the type of language learning strategies and frequency use of Thai EFL university students. This questionnaire consists of a 50-item Likert-type questionnaire with five-scale regarding the six types of language learning strategies as shown in Table 1. The SILL was translated into the Thai language and adapted to suit the Thai context. Borrowed the concept of oxford learning strategies' classification (1990), language learners with the mean of 3.5 or more are considered as high strategy users, language learners who are the medium users show the mean of between 2.4-25 and language learners with the mean of below 2.4 are low strategy users.

Table 1: Distribution of strategy items according to the six strategy types

Strategy Type	Items	Total
Memory	1-9	9
Cognitive	10-23	14
Compensation	24-29	6
Metacognitive	30-38	9
Affective	39-44	6
Social	45-50	6
		50

2. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

In order to categorize high and low language proficiency students, we used a TOEFL test to evaluate students' English proficiency. Based on the results of the test, we could finally divide students into two groups: low and high English language proficiency students.

3. Semi-structured interviews

To gain in-depth data, we employed the semi-structured interviews to ask the participants questions based on each item in the questionnaire. Each interview took approximately thirty minutes, depending on the participants' responses. Field notes were taken during the interviews. All interviews were conducted in Thai and, with permission from our participants, were audio-recorded for further transcription, translation, and analyzes.

Participants

Overall, 27 1st year and 2nd year students majoring in English for Communication major at *Master University* (pseudonym) were invited to participate in this present study. From the overall students, 17 students volunteered to participate in semi-structured interview.

Data analysis

The present researcher employed SPSS program to analyze the quantitative data gathered from SILL questionnaires. The descriptive statistics was employed to investigate the differences between the high and low language proficiency students in their uses of language

learning strategies. Moreover, open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were the technique the researchers used to analyze the interview data.

Results

The findings are based on the mean values of the scores gained by high and low language proficiency students on overall strategies. Table 2 shows the high language proficiency students' responses to language learning strategies. The overall mean of the language learning strategies employed by high language proficiency students is 3.23. They used metacognitive, social, compensation, affective, memory, and cognitive strategies respectively. The mean of the most frequently used strategy, metacognitive, is 3.51. And, the mean of the least frequently used strategy, cognitive, is 2.95.

Table 2: Frequency of Language Learning Strategies employed by high language proficiency students

Strategy	Mean	S.D.	Rank	Use
Metacognitive	3.51	.92	1	High
Social	3.37	.97	2	Medium
Compensation	3.25	.97	3	Medium
Affective	3.20	1.09	4	Medium
Memory	3.15	.85	5	Medium
Cognitive	2.95	.90	6	Medium

Table 3 the low language proficiency students' responses to language learning strategies. They used metacognitive, affective, compensation, memory, social, and cognitive strategies respectively. The low language proficiency students revealed medium use of

strategy categories as, the overall mean is 2.87. The mean of the most frequently used strategy, metacognitive, is 3.28. And the mean of the least frequently used strategy, cognitive, is 2.67, lower than all other strategy groups is 2.87. The mean of the most frequently used strategy, metacognitive, is 3.28. And the mean of the least frequently used strategy, cognitive, is 2.67, lower than all other strategy groups.

Table 3: Frequency of Language Learning Strategies employed by low language proficiency students

Strategy	Mean	S.D.	Rank	Use
Metacognitive	3.28	.90	1	Medium
Affective	2.92	.93	2	Medium
Compensation	2.84	.92	3	Medium
Memory	2.78	.77	4	Medium
Social	2.75	.84	5	Medium
Cognitive	2.67	.87	6	Medium

As it is shown in Fig. 1, item 2, *I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them*, item 4, *I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used*, and item 8, *I review English lessons often* are the most preferred memory strategies for high language proficiency students. And item 1, *I think of relationship between what I already know and new things I learn in English* is the most preferred memory strategy for low language proficiency students. The mean of memory strategies employed by high and low language proficiency students is 3.15 and 2.78 respectively. This could show that both high and low language proficiency students are medium memory strategy users.

Figure 1. Graphic Representation of Memory Strategies

As a part of qualitative results, all analyzed interview data revealed the insightful participants' responses of theirs uses of memory strategies. Overall, these students' descriptions of their uses of memory strategies were in line with their responses to the questionnaire. Most high language proficiency students stated that they always reviewed the lesson after class. One high language proficiency students said that; "I always review my English lesson when I am at dormitory. I have planned the schedule for my lesson review. I think this is the best way for me to improve my English skills."

To review the lesson after the class is always important in language learning. Another high language proficiency student explained; "I think I am not good enough in English. That is why I review the lesson every day. Paying attention in class is very important but you will gain more understanding if you review it again after the class."

Moreover, the use of new English words in a sentence can also help the high language proficiency students remember English vocabulary. One high language proficiency student said, "When finished the English class, I will gain a number of new vocabulary. I try to use them when I have a chance so, I can remember the new vocabulary automatically."

Apart from memory strategies employed by high language proficiency students, low language proficiency students also explained their uses of this strategy as well. Most low language proficiency students revealed that they try to think of relationship between what they already know and new things they learn in English. One of low language proficiency students explained; "I have tried to link what teacher was teaching with what I had learned in the past. As you know I am not good in English. I never pay attention to English subject so my head is blank if someone asks me about what I am studying."

Another low language proficiency student also expressed her opinion about linking the new knowledge with the previous knowledge. She told that, "When I attend English class, I try to understand what teacher is lecturing. Sometimes, I have found that it is the same lesson that I learned when I was a high school student. For example, present simple tense, I have learned for many years about this tense but I still cannot use it correctly."

The mean of cognitive strategy use for high and low language proficiency students are 2.95 and 2.67 respectively. As represented in figure 2, item 11, *I try to talk like native English speakers* and item 12, *I practice the sounds of English* are the preferred cognitive strategy employed by high proficiency students. And item 11 is also the most preferred memory strategy used by low language proficiency students.

The analyzed interview data also revealed the use of cognitive strategies as the high language proficiency students preferred the most. One high language proficiency student explained,

"For me, accent is important to speak English well. I try to talk like American accent. I think that good English speaker should speak like a native speaker."

Another high language proficiency student also opined the same as the above student. He usually tried to talk like a native speaker when he has a chance to speak English. He told that, "I love to do an imitation exercise by following the video clip in YouTube. I listen to native speakers' conversation and repeat the sentence back as I hear it."

The use of cognitive strategies has also unfolded in the group of low language proficiency students. One low language proficiency student stated; "I don't pay much attention in practicing English. But if I have to do it, I like to pronounce the words after the sound clip that I can choose from YouTube."
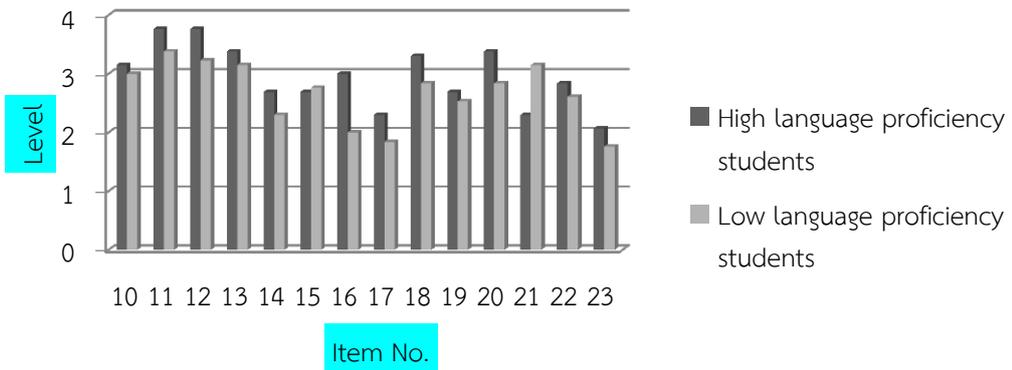

Figure 2. Graphic Representation of Cognitive Strategies

As shown in figure 3, item 25, *When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures* and item 29, *If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing* are the most preferred compensation strategy for high language proficiency students and low language proficiency students respectively.
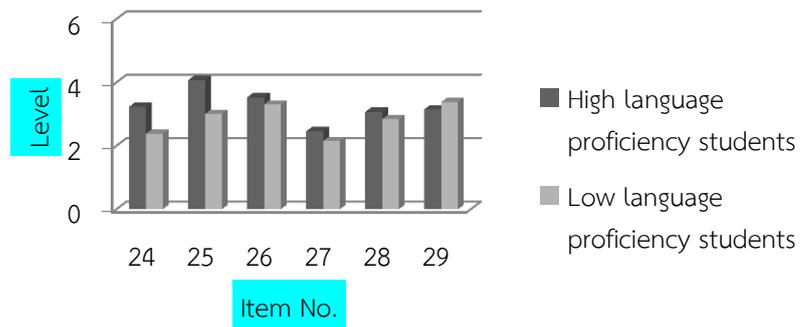

Figure 3. Graphic Representation of Compensation Strategies

The data from semi-structure interview also helped broaden deeper information about how high and low language proficiency students employed compensation strategy. One high language proficiency student explained her use of compensation strategies. In her own words,

"When teacher asked me to answer a question I cannot think of the vocabulary to explain her, I always use gesture to help her understand. This quite works well because my teacher also tries to understand what I am explaining too"

Compensation strategies are also employed by low language proficiency students. Most of low language proficiency students admitted that they had limited vocabulary. As a result, they used their first language (Thai or Malay) instead. One low language proficiency student said that, "I am not good at English. I don't know much English vocabulary, so I sometimes do the slip of my tongue. I use some Malay or Thai words to answer my teacher's questions."

The answers of the participants in this present study revealed that metacognitive strategies are the most preferred strategy employed by high and low language proficiency students. The high language proficiency students are high metacognitive users but low language proficiency students are medium metacognitive users. According to Figure 4, item 38, *I think about my progress in learning English* is the most preferred metacognitive strategy for both high and low language proficiency students. The reason for the most frequent use of this strategy may be in line with many studies of EFL learners in various countries (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Zhang & Seepho, 2013; Setuyadi, Sukirlan & Mahpul, 2016) unveiled results that metacognitive strategy is a powerful tool in learning second language and also directs the execution of learning process.

The results from interview data also helped support that most of high and proficiency students at *Master University* employed metacognitive strategies in their language learning. Most of them opined that they would like to develop their language learning. One of them said, "I would like to develop my English skills so I choose to study English for Communication. I try very hard to study in class and outside the class. I spend time practicing English by myself because I have high expectation in my study. I would like to be good at English and also to have a good job in the future."

Another high language proficiency student also shared or less the same with the above student. In her own words, "When I applied to study in English for Communication major, I start thinking about my future and studying English. I choose reading skills the most important for me. I practice it by reading a short story per a week. From reading, I can learn grammar and usage. Then I try to work on my writing skill. In order to practice my writing skill, I use a diary. I sometimes write diary if I have time. I do my best to see how my English skills have been improved when I graduate."
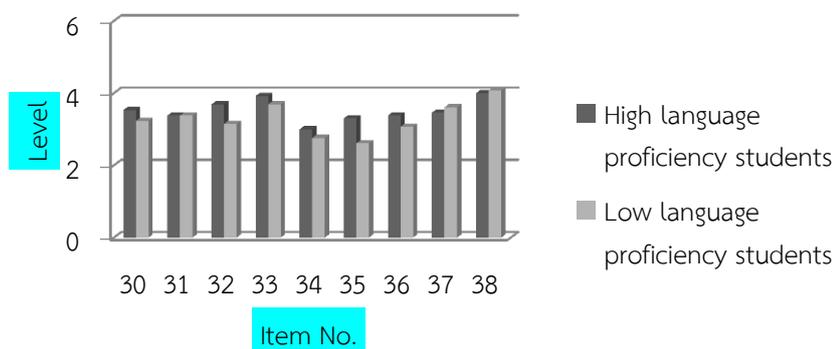

Figure 4. Graphic Representation of Metacognitive Strategies

According to Fig. 5, item 39, *I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English is the most preferred compensation strategy for high language proficiency students*. Surprisingly, low language proficiency students' responses revealed that item 42, *I notice if I am tense when I am studying or using English* is the most preferred compensation strategy for them and it also higher employed than the high language proficiency students.

To support quantitative data above, the results from semi-structured interview revealed how high and low language proficiency students employed their compensation strategy in their language learning. They admitted that they felt anxious when they had to speak English or unable to explain their ideas in English. One high language proficiency student told that, "I sometimes feel nervous when I have to answer teacher's questions. My hands shake and I always lick my lips. But I try to control my pressure by relaxing. I will speak slowly and manage my ideas in my mind before I speak."

One low language proficiency student shared more or less the same opinion. He said that he always lost his control when he had to speak English. In his own words, "When I am assigned to do a presentation, I find that I am unhappy. I cannot sleep well the day before the presentation. I don't like when teacher calls my name to present something in front of the class. I forget everything when standing in front of a large group of people."
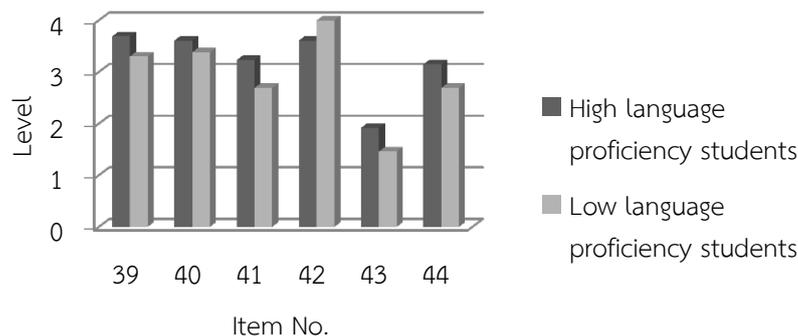

Figure 5. Graphic Representation of Affective Strategies

As well as the use of social strategy is concerned, the employed questionnaire measures the use of this strategy between high and low language proficiency students. As it is shown in Fig. 6, item 45, *if I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again* is the most preferred social strategy for both high and low language proficiency students. However, high language proficiency students highly employed this social strategy for their language learning (mean: 3.37) while low language proficiency students sometime used this strategy for their language learning (mean: 2.75). This could show that high language proficiency students are aware of working with others to enhance their L2 proficiency and also to understand the target culture than low language proficiency students.

The analyzed interview data could help confirm how high and low language proficiency students employed social strategies in their English learning. They always set their own language learning environment by themselves. Also they complained about the lack of using real English at the university. One high language proficiency student said, "I wonder why we do not have a foreign teacher in our program. It might because of the budget or whatever I do not know. Consequently, if I am with my friends, we try to practice English speaking. We talk in

English and pretend like we are foreigners. We all know we make a lot of errors while speaking but everyone feels enjoyable and love it. I think it is the best way to help us be confident to speak English when we use it in class."

Another high proficiency student also stated that he practiced English by asking from his

foreign friends. He added, "I love travelling, so I always meet foreigners. I try to keep connection with them. When I have some problems in English, I ask them to help me and correct my English speaking."
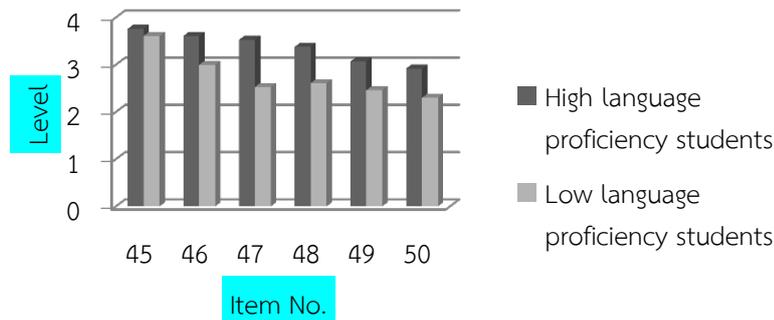

Figure 6. Graphic Representation of Social Strategies

Conclusion and Discussion

This research study, to some extent, brings more understanding of language learning strategies among Thai EFL university students. The present study not only examined the most and least language learning strategies employed by high and low language proficiency students but also determined how those students acquire language learning strategies. The participating students seemed to be aware of importance of language learning strategies that help enhance their English learning. The high language proficiency students reported using metacognitive strategy the most in their language learning while the low language proficiency students tended to sometimes use the metacognitive strategies to facilitate their own language learning. The participating students used cognitive strategies the least. The present study also found that the high language proficiency students used overall language learning strategies more frequently than the low language proficiency students. Consequently, English language teachers should try to enable the students to manipulate the language materials in direct ways through learning

by native English speakers in order to set students' chances of learning in naturalistic settings.

More important, the results of this study highlighted the essential of language learning strategies that could create a number of useful implications which finally can be used as a guideline to improve an educational situation and also to bridge the gap between EFL students' language learning strategies and their preferences of teachers' teaching methodology. All EFL students should realize the importance of language learning strategies. Not only that, the results could benefit language teachers to assess their students' use of strategies, so that they will be aware of their teaching methodology which matches to students' preferences. Teachers should provide the environment for students to learn language naturally. Moreover, the focus of strategy instruction should focus on low language proficiency students by giving them the opportunities to evaluate their progress of learning. This might help them a lot to success in their language learning.

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