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## THE LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF THAI STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF NONG KHAI, NORTHEAST OF THAILAND

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### ABSTRACT

Language learning strategies (LLSs) enable ESL/EFL learners not only to acquire language effectively but also to improve their proficiency and autonomous learning. The purpose of the present study is to examine the frequency of use of language learning strategies employed by 353 students studying at Khon Kaen University, Nong Khai Campus (KKU, NKC) in the Northeast of Thailand, as well as the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the students' perceived enjoyment of English learning. A language learning strategy questionnaire (LLSQ) was conducted. The data obtained through the questionnaires was analysed using descriptive statistics, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the Chi-square tests. The results indicate significant variations according to the students' stated enjoyment of English learning. Students who said they enjoyed learning English at the higher level reported employing significantly greater numbers of overall strategies than those who expressed lower levels of enjoyment while learning English. The pedagogical implications of the study are presented and discussed.

**Key Words:** language learning strategies, enjoyment of English learning, university students

### INTRODUCTION

English is undeniably one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. These days, English is used as a *lingua franca* among non-native speakers worldwide. Although the number of people who speak English cannot be calculated, it is obvious that English has been increasingly used as an alternative form of communication for countries where English is not the national language. Some major examples include member nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community (including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam). In Thailand, English is considered as a foreign language that was first taught during the reign of King Rama III (1824–1851) by American missionaries. Currently, English is taught at the primary level up to the tertiary level. According to The Office of the National Education Commission (2000), the 2001 Basic Education Curriculum has set up the core curriculum for foreign language learning, with English required for all levels of study until graduation. In the Thai education system, English is compulsory and taught from the first year of primary school to the upper secondary level. At the tertiary level, English is offered for university students as both compulsory and elective courses. Undergraduates are required to take at least 12 credits or 4 subjects in English to complete their education. Of the four subjects, the first two are taken as fundamental courses. The other two are taught as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Students can also take other English elective courses if they wish to be more proficient (Toomnan, 2014).

Although all Thai learners have been studying English since the primary level, most have a low level of English language skills. This may be partly due to the aim of learning English for the successful completion of examinations rather than for communication. Students

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are required to study grammar rules to assess their aptitude in the examination. This leaves Thai learners with an insufficient command of English skills for the purpose of real-world communication, and may hinder them in their improvement because of the mismatch of language policies and practices (Choomthong, 2014).

LLSs are useful techniques that enable language learners to acquire language and improve their progress in developing L2 skills. Some try to learn a language by speaking with native speakers. Some use social networking sites to create opportunities for practice. Other learners use pictures to help them to remember words they have read. In case they do not know the meaning of words, using a context clue is another good strategy. It seems that learners tend to find their own effective ways to improve and enhance their language learning.

Several past research works have investigated LLSs in relation to such factors as gender (Su and Duo, 2012), language proficiency levels (Kamalizad and Jalilzadeh, 2011; Han, 2013), socioeconomic status (Tam, 2013), self-rating (Radwan, 2011), and the enjoyment of English learning (Wong and Nunan, 2011; Zhou, 2014). They reported that these factors had effects on the use of LLSs by learners. For example, a study by Zhou (2014) revealed that students who said they enjoyed learning English at a high level tended to use more strategies than those who said they enjoyed learning English at a moderate or low level.

In Thailand, a small number of research works have been conducted on the use of LLSs by first-year university students (Prakrongchati, 2007; Satta-Udom, 2007; Maharachapong, 2008), but no past research has explored the relationship between students' choices of language learning strategies (LLS) and their expressed enjoyment of learning English. To fill the gap, the researcher aims to explore students' LLSs and the relationship between choices of LLSs and students' enjoyment of English learning. Pedagogical implications will be discussed so as to improve instructional management and enhance students' language learning skills.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### LLSs

The term "language learning strategies" has been defined by linguists and researchers based on their experience and research works. LLSs have been described as either observable behaviours (Chamot, 1987 and 2001; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Oxford, 1990) or unobservable behaviours (Nunan, 1991). Oxford (1990) defines "language learning strategy" as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990). Meanwhile, Nunan (1991) sees LLSs as the mental process which students used to acquire and use the target language.

LLSs can be divided into two main categories (Oxford, 1990): direct strategies and indirect strategies. The former category consists of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Strategies in this category are used to improve language learners' skills. The latter category includes metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Direct strategies (i.e., memory, cognitive, and compensation) are mainly used to help language learners to store and recover information, to produce language even when there is a gap in their knowledge, to understand and use the new language. Memory strategies are useful for beginners to recognise vocabulary learning. Learners can make use of visual images and link those images with words to store and retrieve, enhancing their language learning. Cognitive strategies consist of four sub-categories: practicing, receiving and sending messages, analysing and reasoning, and creating structure. These strategies enable language learners to understand the meaning and production of new language. Compensation strategies are employed to guess and overcome language problems because of learners' insufficient knowledge of the target language. In terms of indirect strategies (i.e., metacognitive, affective, and social strategies), metacognitive strategies help learners plan and evaluate their language learning. In contrast,

affective strategies allow learners to deal with their emotions, attitudes, and motivations, especially when feeling anxiety, during language learning. Social strategies can be used by asking questions, cooperating and empathising with others. In other words, these strategies facilitate learners to cooperate and interact with others appropriately.

Oxford (2011) proposed a new Strategic Self-Regulation Model of language learning, which comprised four main strategies: cognitive strategies, sociocultural-interactive strategies, metastrategies, and affective strategies. The sociocultural aspect is noticeably taken into consideration in Oxford's (2011) model of language learning, with the aim of coping with issues of contexts, communication, and culture in L2 learning. Metastrategies guide all three dimensions (the cognitive, sociocultural-interactive, and affective dimensions) that allow learners to understand their own needs and employ and adjust other strategies to meet them.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study aims to identify the types and frequency of LLSs used by first-year KKU and NKC students in their language learning, to investigate how they relate to the enjoyment of English learning and explore significant variation patterns in the frequency of reported strategies used in relation to this variable.

### **Variable**

The students' expression of enjoyment in learning English was classified into three categories (high, moderate, low). The data for this came from a simple questionnaire in which students were asked "Do you enjoy learning English?" Students were provided with five different choices of response: not at all, not very much, somewhat, a lot, and extremely. Students who chose "not at all" or "not very much" were categorised at the low level; students who chose "somewhat" were grouped at the moderate level; and those students who chose "a lot" and "extremely" were considered to be at the high level.

### **Research Instrument**

The researcher adopted the Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire by Zhou (2014) to explore possible correlations between students' expressions of enjoyment in learning English and their choice of LLSs. The question items were checked for content validity by three Thai instructors of English to maximise ease of administration and ensure greater accuracy of findings. The questions were translated into Thai by the researcher. Importantly, before administering the questionnaires, the respondents were informed to ensure that they knew the objective of study, the importance of the study, the organisation in charge of investigating the study, and providing them with a statement assuring them there was no right or wrong answer, requesting honest answers, promising confidentiality, and expressing appreciation.

### **Subjects**

The subjects for the present study were first-year students studying at Khon Kaen University, Nong Khai Campus. The participants of the study were 353 students selected through Yamane's formula of sample size with an error of 5% and a confidence coefficient of 95% (Yamane, 1973). The participants were further classified into three groups: 87 had expressed a high level of enjoyment of English learning, 144 who reported moderate levels of enjoyment, and 122 who expressed low enjoyment in learning English.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

To analyse quantitative data, descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and Chi-square tests were employed. To find the correlation between LLS use and expressed enjoyment of English learning, ANOVA were employed to access the overall strategy use. In addition, Chi-square tests were employed to validate significant variations at the individual strategy level.

## RESULTS

### Variations in Overall Reported LLS Use

**Table 1: Variations in the Frequency of Students' Overall Reported LLS Use**

Enjoyment of English Learning		High (n=87)		Moderate (n=144)		Low (n=122)		Sig.	Comments
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Overall LLS Use		3.20	.57	2.97	.50	2.77	.56	P < .001	Hi > Mo > Lo

Note: S.D.: standard deviation; Sig. level: significant level; Hi: High, Mo: Moderate, Lo: Low

As can be seen from the table, based on ANOVA results, significant variations were found in the overall LLS use among the students reporting “high”, “moderate” and “low” levels of enjoyment while learning English. The mean frequency scores are 3.20, 2.97 and 2.77 respectively. The results indicate that the students who said they experienced a high level of enjoyment reported employing significantly greater numbers of strategies overall than those who said they enjoyed learning English at a more moderate or lower level.

### Variations in LLS Use in the Four Categories by Enjoyment of English Learning

Based on the ANOVA results, Table 2 below shows that significant differences were found in the frequency of use of LLSs in all the four categories according to this variable. Post hoc Scheffe test shows that in relation to the COG, SCI, MET and AFF categories, students who said they highly enjoyed learning English reported employing strategies significantly more frequently in all four categories than those who said they enjoyed learning English at a more moderate or lower level.

**Table 2: Variations in LLS Use in the Four Categories by Levels of Enjoyment of English Learning**

Strategy Category	High (n=87)		Moderate (n=144)		Low (n=122)		Sig.	Comments
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
1) COG	3.05	.54	2.86	.52	2.68	.58	P < .001	Hi > Mo Hi > Lo
2) SCI	3.28	.76	3.04	.62	2.84	.67	P < .001	Hi > Mo Hi > Lo
3) MET	3.27	.63	2.94	.60	2.72	.63	P < .001	Hi > Mo Hi > Lo
4) AFF	3.44	.83	3.26	.62	3.10	.67	P < .01	Hi > Mo Hi > Lo

### Variation in Individual LLS Use by Levels of Enjoyment of English Learning

The results of the Chi-square tests reveal that 26 out of 48 strategies chosen for use varied significantly according to this variable (Table 3).

**Table 3 Variation in Individual LLS Use by Levels of Enjoyment of English Learning**

Individual LLSs	% of high use (4 and 5)			Observed $\chi^2$
	High	Moderate	Low	
Used more frequently by students with high expressions of enjoyment of English learning (23 LLSs)				
MET22 Trying to find out how to learn English well	69.0	50.0	42.6	$\chi^2 = 14.56^{***}$
MET26 Thinking about one's progress in learning English	60.9	52.8	33.6	$\chi^2 = 17.25^{***}$
AFF30 Telling oneself that there is always more to learn when learning English	56.3	44.4	35.2	$\chi^2 = 9.15^{**}$
COG4 Using vocabulary books or electronic dictionaries to remember new English words	55.2	47.2	37.7	$\chi^2 = 6.41^*$
COG21 Improving one's English from his/her own mistakes	55.2	34.7	27.9	$\chi^2 = 16.91^{***}$
SCI43 Participating in classroom activities in English classes	52.9	42.4	30.3	$\chi^2 = 10.94^{**}$
AFF27 Trying to relax whenever feeling afraid of using English	51.7	36.1	27.9	$\chi^2 = 12.49^{**}$
MET25 Having clear goals for improving one's English skills	50.6	40.3	24.6	$\chi^2 = 15.51^{***}$
AFF28 Encouraging oneself to speak English even when one is afraid of making mistakes	50.6	44.4	32.0	$\chi^2 = 8.02^*$
MET24 Looking for opportunities/chances to read as much as possible in English	49.4	30.6	23.0	$\chi^2 = 16.66^{***}$
SCI8 Trying to talk like native speakers	49.4	41.7	29.5	$\chi^2 = 8.97^*$
SCI36 Asking for help from one's English teacher or friends	48.3	32.6	23.8	$\chi^2 = 13.77^{***}$
MET42 Systematically reviewing vocabulary, texts and notes before exams	46.0	31.2	21.3	$\chi^2 = 14.34^{***}$
SCI34 Asking one's English teacher or fluent speakers of English to correct one's speech	42.5	28.5	25.4	$\chi^2 = 7.63^*$
SCI37 Trying to learn about the culture of English-speaking countries	40.2	32.6	19.7	$\chi^2 = 11.0^{**}$
COG15 Guessing the meaning of any unfamiliar English words	39.1	26.4	17.2	$\chi^2 = 12.52^{**}$
MET45 Improving one's English by reading different websites	39.1	21.5	19.7	$\chi^2 = 11.90^{**}$
MET9 Watching English-speaking movies or TV programs	37.9	31.9	22.1	$\chi^2 = 6.46^*$
COG7 Remembering new English words or phrases by remembering the contexts in which they appear	36.8	29.2	21.3	$\chi^2 = 6.07^*$
SCI35 Practicing speaking English with other students	34.5	22.2	13.9	$\chi^2 = 12.35^{**}$
MET23 Planning one's schedule so that one will have enough time to learn English	33.3	19.4	18.9	$\chi^2 = 7.51^*$
SCI46 Participating in extra-curricular activities	32.2	18.8	17.2	$\chi^2 = 7.85^*$

COG41 Trying to understand complex English sentences by analysing their grammatical structures	31.0	18.8	16.4	$\chi^2 = 7.29^*$
<b>Used more frequently by students with high expression of enjoyment of English learning (rather than low or moderate) (3 LLSs)</b>	<b>% of high use (4 and 5)</b>			<b>Observed <math>\chi^2</math></b>
	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	
AFF32 Talking to someone else about how one feels when one is learning English	44.8	33.6	26.4	$\chi^2 = 8.29^*$
MET38 Practicing reading English on the Internet	43.7	29.5	29.2	$\chi^2 = 6.13^*$
COG2 Using new English words in a sentence so that one can remember them	37.9	27.9	21.5	$\chi^2 = 7.28^*$

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

As shown in Table 3 above, the Chi-square results reveal that significant variations in the use of 26 individual LLSs were found in relation to students' expressions of enjoyment of English learning. Two variation patterns were found: "high > moderate > low" and "high > low > moderate".

The first variation pattern, "high > moderate > low", indicates that a significantly greater percentage of students who said they enjoyed learning English at the higher level reported higher levels of use of 23 LLSs than those who said they enjoyed learning English at a moderate level, followed by a lower frequency among students in the low group. Of the 26 LLSs, there were 5 cognitive strategies (COG), 7 sociocultural-interactive strategies (SCI), 8 metastrategies (MET), and 3 affective strategies (AFF). Further, among the 23 LLSs, 9 strategies were chosen at a high frequency of use by more than 50% of all the participants who said they enjoyed learning English at the high level: for example, "MET22 Trying to find out how to learn English well"; "AFF30 Telling oneself that there is always more to learn when learning English"; "COG4 Using vocabulary books or electronic dictionaries to remember new English words"; "SCI43 Participating in classroom activities in English classes"; "AFF27 Trying to relax whenever feeling afraid of using English"; and "AFF28 Encouraging oneself to speak English even when one is afraid of making mistakes".

The second variation pattern, "high > low > moderate", indicated that the significance was ordered differently. A significantly greater percentage of students who said they enjoyed learning English at the high level reported a higher rate of use of 3 LLSs than those who said they enjoyed learning English at a low level, followed by a lower frequency among students in the moderate group. These LLSs are, "AFF32 Talking to someone else about how one feels when learning English"; "MET38 Practicing English reading on the Internet"; and "COG2 Using new English words in a sentence so that one can remember them".

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present investigation revealed that students with higher expressions of enjoyment in English learning reported employing strategies more frequently than did their counterparts with lower expressions of enjoyment. This was significant in both overall strategy and categorical variations in strategy choices in the COG, SCI, MET, and AFF categories. The findings of the present study also show that 26 out of 48 individual LLSs varied significantly in relation to students' expressed levels of enjoyment in English learning. Two main patterns of variations emerged: 1) high > moderate > low included 23 strategies which fell into this pattern; and 2) high > low > moderate, included 3 strategies in this variation pattern.

The most salient explanation for the findings of the present study is, of course, motivation. According to Ryun (cited in Sander, 2012, p. 9), "Motivation is what gets one started; habit is what keeps one doing". Whenever one is motivated to do something over and

over again – for example language learning – action can form a habit. A student who does well experiences reward, and is encouraged to try harder, while a student who does not do so well is discouraged by his/her lack of success, and lacks persistence as a result (Skehan, 1989). Oxford (1990) states that more motivated learners tend to employ more strategies than less motivated learners. In the field of language learning, the results of past research (e.g. Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Bernard, 2010; Chang and Liu, 2013; and Tanthanis, 2014) reveal that motivation is one of the most powerful factors influencing students' LLS use.

As reported by Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p. 294), "The degree of expressed motivation to learn the language was the most powerful influence on strategy choice." A recent study by Chang and Liu (2013) also confirms that students' motivation is a factor affecting the choices of different LLSs to different degrees. They find that metacognitive and cognitive strategies have higher correlations with motivation, while compensation strategies have lower correlations. They also suggest that it is important and helpful to acknowledge and enhance students' awareness of strategy use in accordance with their levels of motivation. In Thailand, Taw (2008) and Khamkhien (2010) report that motivation has a great influence on using LLSs.

Another possible explanation for the findings of the present investigation is personality differences. A number of personality characteristics have been proposed as likely to influence second language learning (Littlewood, 1984). Everyone has his/her own individual differences for dealing with their foreign language acquisition. MacIntyre et al. (1998) state that personality has an effect on language learners' willingness to communicate in second/foreign languages. Several studies have been carried out to investigate the personality correlates of academic achievement (Rossier, 1975; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Dewaele and Furnham, 2000; Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, 2003; Farsides and Woodfield, 2003; Li and Qin, 2006; Sharp, 2008; Zhou, 2014). For instance, Rossier (1975) found a relationship between extroversion and oral fluency. A recent study by Zhou (2014) reported that extroverts reported employing strategies significantly more frequently than did the introverts. Therefore, personality differences might have an effect on their language learning strategy use.

One other possible reason for the high frequency of strategy use by students with high enjoyment of English learning is prior language proficiency. According to the results of past research works (Wong and Nunan, 2011; Tanthanis, 2014; Zhou, 2014), the aspect of enjoyment of English learning reveals a significant difference between more and less effective students. A study by Zhou (2014) reports that the frequency of pre-service teachers' overall LLS use varied significantly according to students' enjoyment of English learning and language proficiency. She supports the claim that significant variation was found in the overall LLS use between the pre-service teachers at "high" and "low" language proficiency levels, and between those at the "moderate" and "low" language proficiency levels. A study by Tanthanis (2014) also indicates that LLSs have a positive relationship with both language learning motivation and prior language proficiency. This is consistent with Ellis (1994), who finds a feedback relationship in which LLS use has an effect on language proficiency, which in turn affects LLS use.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Some implications for the teaching and learning of English for teachers and students may be drawn from the research findings:

- According to the results of the present study, students with high levels of enjoyment of English learning were more likely to use strategies than those with moderate and low levels of reported enjoyment with learning English. Teachers should encourage learners, especially students who appear to enjoy learning English at only a moderate or low level, to use various LLSs in and after class;
- There is no definitive teaching approach. A wide range of teaching methods, such as Communicative language teaching (CLT), Task-based Learning approach (TBL), Code-

switching, Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) or LLSs, should be integrated to stimulate and enhance learners' language acquisition;

- As stated by Oxford (1990), the more motivated the learners are, the more likely they are to use a variety of strategies. Therefore, teachers should try to give students more chances to experience success to encourage them to be more motivated; and
- Enjoyment of English learning should not be taken for granted. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970 cited in Goodall and Goodall, 2006), safety, love and belonging are focal basic needs for all human beings. In terms of teaching and learning circumstances, if teachers create relaxing, joyful, supportive and safe classroom atmospheres, learners will be more motivated and willing to learn. Eventually, they will recognise self-esteem and self-actualisation without any kind of reinforcement.

## CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the use of LLSs by first-year university students studying at KKU, NKC, the Northeast of Thailand. The study contributes to the field of LLSs in Thailand. Few past research works have been explored in terms of the effects of enjoyment of English learning on learners' strategy use in the Thai context. The results of the present study indicated that the frequency of strategy used by the participants was at a moderate level of use overall, and levels of individual strategy use in 26 out of 48 strategy items were significant based on expressions of enjoyment of English learning.

In summary, this study indicated that expressions of enjoyment in English learning have a strong relationship with students' LLS use. Enjoyment of English learning is therefore an important and powerful factor in students' language learning. It is hoped that future research may gain further insights into how LLSs are used by EFL learners in different language learning contexts.

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