

The Relationships between Language Learning Strategies and Learning Styles of Ethnic Students at Thai Nguyen University, Viet Nam

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Abstract: The present study aims to explore the frequency of Language learning strategy use and examines the Language Learning strategies (LLS) of Thai Nguyen University (TNU) ethnic EFL learners in order to identify whether there is any meaningful relationship between the LLS and the learners' learning styles. 527 ethnic students at Thai Nguyen University participated in the study. The Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire which is based on the Strategy Inventory Language Learning from Oxford's (1990) and The Perceptual Learning Styles Preferences Questionnaire were administered to collect data for the present study. The findings from the present investigation, TNU ethnic students were medium strategy users. However, one strategy category, i.e., metacognitive category, was used at a high frequency as the most frequently used strategy category. Memory and cognitive strategies were used as the least frequently used categories by the participants of the study. In addition, learning styles did not have much influence on the learning strategy use.

Index Terms: language learning strategy, ethnic students, learning styles, Thai Nguyen University

I. INTRODUCTION

Research results over the past decades have indicated that a key reason why many second language learners fail, while some learners do better with less effort, lies in various learner attributes such as personality traits, educational perspectives, motivation, cultural backgrounds, or language aptitude. It is also worth mentioning that types of strategies used by different learners vary due to stage of learning, teacher expectations, general learning styles, degree of awareness, teaching methods, text-books innovation, purpose for learning the language, and nationality or ethnicity (Bedell, 1993). To put it differently, a learner's individual factors can influence which learning strategy the learners will use for their foreign language learning. Once well-managed, these variables can significantly contribute to a learner's success in language learning. Many researchers (e.g., Reid, 1995; Zhang, 2005; Rahimi and Riazi, 2005; Yang, 2010; Minh, 2012; Zeynali, 2012; and Salahshour and Sharifi, 2013) suggest that strategies of successful language learners can supply a basis for aiding language learners, and the conscious use of language learning strategies makes good language learners.

From the researcher's experience as a teacher of English for more than 17 years with Thai Nguyen University (TNU), I am aware of the fact that students in general and ethnic students in particular are often confused to use their own strategies and abilities to transform their failing situations into successful learning experiences. In addition, I found that students with different individual identities study English in different ways and have different levels of proficiency. It seems that they are not what so called "lazy" and "not motivated". Their language achievement may be affected by many individual factors and the culture which they inherited.

Thai Nguyen University (TNU) is located in the northern midland and mountainous region where many ethnic minorities live in harmony for a long tradition, in which ethnic minorities accounted for 24% - the highest rate in the country with their own cultural identities. At present, TNU has a current enrollment of 90,000 students, of which there are about 65,000 undergraduate (55,000 full-time and 10,000 part-time) and others are professional vocational students. The annual application average is from 70-80,000 applications from various parts of the country, mostly from 16 northern upland provinces of Vietnam.

So far, in Vietnam, quite a few studies have been conducted to explore the use of LLS at tertiary level and the relationships between LLS and learning styles. None have explored the choice or use of LLS which is influenced by learning styles in order to provide enough information which aid both teachers and educators in planning and of individual and group instruction.

The present study examines the LLS of TNU ethnic EFL learners in order to identify whether there is any meaningful relationship between the LLS and the learners' learning styles.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Learning Strategies Definitions and classifications

Difficulties in defining LLS remain even at the basic level of terminology, each individual researchers define LLS in different ways such as 'technique', 'tactic' and 'skill'. These definitions are sometimes overlap and conflict to each other. Just as Oxford (1990) defines the term as 'behaviours' or actions. This means LLS is observable, whereas Weinstein and

Mayer (1986) argues LLS involve both behaviours and thoughts (unobservable).

Altogether, the researcher agrees with Liang (2009) that LLS has some characteristics as follows.

- Learning strategies are either behavioral thus observable, or mental then not observable.
- Learning strategies could be either general approaches or specific actions or techniques adopted to learn a Target Language (TL).
- Learners are generally aware of what approaches or techniques they have used in language learning, despite some subconscious activities under certain circumstances.

Oxford (1990) describes language learning strategies as specific, self-directed steps taken by learners to enhance their own learning. She separates strategies into two strategy orientations and six strategies groups: (1) direct learning orientation, consisting of (a) memory, (b) cognitive, and (c) linguistic deficiency compensation strategy groups, and (2) an indirect learning orientation, consisting of (a) metacognitive, (b) affective, and (c) social strategy groups. There are some other ways of classifying language learning strategies (Rubin 1981; Skehan 1989; Ellis 1997). Chamot (1990) presents three major classes of strategies: (a) metacognitive, (b) cognitive, and (c) socio-affective. Language learning strategies have been classified as (a) meta-cognitive, cognitive, or socio-affective (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1995) or (b) direct or indirect (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975, 1987).

As can be seen from above, the LLS classification still overlaps and conflict in opinions and the process of establishing terminology, definitions. Classification systems for language learning strategies are far from straightforward. This study is only based on the classification with the main focus on types of LLS used by the TNU ethnic students. The present study concentrates on LLS with the purpose to examine the relationship between language learning strategies and the TNU ethnic students from the cultural anthropology perspectives.

Language Learning Strategies and Learning Styles

The term 'learning styles' has been defined as "cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment". Keefe, (1982, p. 44). In addition, learning styles are the general approaches – for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual – that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject. These styles are "the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behavior" (Corbett, 1999, p. 9). Claxton and Murrell (1987) analyze learning styles at four levels: personality, information processing, social interaction, and instructional methods. After reviewing the state of the art of research in learning styles, the authors indicated a need for further investigation in a number of areas. They reported that we need to know more about the actual impact on learning

when methods used by an instructor are inconsistent with a student's style. Dunn & Griggs (1988, p. 3) affirm that "learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others".

Although learning styles are not dichotomous (black or white, present or absent), learning styles generally operate on a continuum or on multiple, intersecting continua. For example, a person might be more extroverted than introverted, or more closure-oriented than open, or equally visual and auditory but with lesser kinesthetic and tactile involvement. Few if any people could be classified as having all or nothing in any of these categories (Ehrman, 1996).

Active and reflective learners are related to extrovert and introvert, as described by the Myers-Briggs model (the model of personality development created by Briggs Myers). Sensing learners learn by observing, gathering data through the senses, while intuitive learners learn by indirect perception and imagination. Visual learners learn by seeing pictures, diagrams and timetables. On the other hand, verbal learners learn through words, written and spoken explanations. Sequential learners learn by following logically step by step, whereas global learners learn more randomly without any connections (Gunduz & Ozcan, 2010).

Reid (1987; 1995) and Oxford and Anderson (1995) demonstrate that ESL students varied significantly in their sensory preferences, with people from certain cultures differentially favoring the three different modalities for learning. Students from Asian cultures, for instance, were often highly visual, with Koreans being the most visual. Many studies, including Reid's, found that Hispanic learners were frequently auditory. Reid discovered that Japanese are very non-auditory. ESL students from a variety of cultures were tactile and kinesthetic in their sensory preferences.

It has been stated that people from different cultures and even individuals within the same culture have distinctive learning style patterns (Guild, 1994). Due to different types of learning style, teaching methods which are used by instructors may vary. Some instructors prefer giving lectures at classroom; other may focus more on rules, some use demonstration, while some prefer memorization. As a result, the mismatch between the individual's learning style and the instructor's teaching style may lead to failure of learners. In order to address different learning styles, effective teachers use a variety of teaching styles and apply diverse teaching strategies and make effective educational decisions and practices that work best for all students (Guild, 1994; Felder & Silverman, 1998; Lawrence, 1993; Oxford, Ehrman, & Lavine, 1991; Schemek, 1998).

Although a great amount of research has been conducted on learning styles, Wintergerst et al., (2003) argue that not as much research has been documented on non-native speakers and second language learners. In this respect, the present study explores the possible relationships between the TNU ethnic students preferred learning styles and their language learning strategies.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research questions

1. What English language learning strategies are frequently used by the TNU ethnic students?
2. To what extent, do the students' choices of language learning strategies vary significantly with their learning styles? If so, what are the main patterns of variation?

Data Collection Instruments

Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire

In this study, the instrument used to elicit and collect information is in the form of questionnaire. In order to measure language learning strategy use, The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Version (SILL) was used. The SILL, a self-scoring questionnaire, developed by Oxford (1990), is a tool to assess a broad range of general L2 learning strategies. The SILL includes two versions: version 5.1 (70 items) and version 7.0 (50 items). Version 5.1 was designed to assess the frequency of use of language learning strategies by native-speaking English students and version 7.0 was designed to measure the use of language learning strategies by non-native speaking English students who are learning English as a second or foreign language.

For the present study, the Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire (LLSQ) which is based on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Version 7.0 (SILL), the Cronbach's alpha, which indicates the internal consistency reliability of the survey items was .85 for the sample of 527 participants in this study. In regards to the content validity, the inter-rater agreement, which correlates five judges rating was .95, a very high level of agreement statistically speaking. The LLSQ was then translated into Vietnamese, so that the students had no difficulty in understanding them.

Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the study was an adapted version of the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLPQ) was designed and developed by Reid (1987, 1990, 1998).

Because this instrument was developed by Western researchers for ESL learners, the statements were either rephrased or rewritten. A small number of the statements (items 10, 7, 6, 5, 3), five of them (15%), were revised by the researcher himself. E.g., item 3 and item 5 the word "others" was revised into "classmates"; or item 7 "When someone tells me how to do something in class, I learn it better" was changed into "When teacher tells me how to do something in class, I learn it better" and so on

Participants

the participants consisted of 527 ethnic students who were randomly selected from over 4000 ethnic students at TNU. The students are all native speakers of Vietnamese. They were respondents to the Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire

(LLSQ) and the Perceptual Learning-Style Preference Questionnaire (PLPQ). Most of the students are 18-35 years of age and they are from different learning styles.

Data Collection Procedures

The quantitative data was collected from ethnic students at Thai Nguyen University. As a first step in the process of data collection, the researcher contacted the directors of the Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Department at TN University of Sciences (TNUS), TN University of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAF), TN University of Technology (TNUT) and TN University of Education (TNUE), explaining the nature and purpose of the study. Permission was granted to conduct the study. The students were notified in advance that they would be completing the two questionnaires on a certain day. Before the questionnaires were administered, the students were given guidelines and instructions for administering the questionnaire.

The ethnic students were fully informed, both verbally and in writing, of the following: their rights, what was required of them, and how the data collected was going to be used and treated in regard to their privacy. The students were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they were not under any obligation to consent to participate. The LLSQ and the LPLQ were administered to all ethnic students in (n=527) during the first week of the semester in academic year 2015-2016. The purpose of the questionnaire is to explore and examine students' learning strategy uses, the possible patterns of variation between LLS and ethnic students' gender, major fields of study, and levels of proficiency. After finishing the LLSQ, the ethnic students were asked to complete the PLPQ with the aim to explore the ethnic students preferred learning styles. The two questionnaires took students 1 hour to complete.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. What English language learning strategies are frequently used by the TNU ethnic students?

According to Oxford's (1990) classification, the range of 3.5-5.0 (mean score) for each of the SILL item is thought to reflect the high level use of the strategy; a mean of all participants in the range of 2.5-3.4 is thought to be in medium use, and 1.0-2.4 belongs to low use.

Table 1 below shows overall picture of ethnic students' reported strategy use in terms of overall strategy use. As can be seen in Table 2.2, the mean frequency score of the ethnic students' reported overall strategy use is 3.20. This means that these 527 ethnic students at Thai Nguyen University, as the whole, reported employing language learning strategies with moderate frequency when they have to deal with language learning.

Table 1: Frequency of Students' Overall Strategy Use

	N	Mean	S.D	Frequency Category
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Students' Reported Overall Strategy Use	527	3.20	.20	Medium use
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Regarding frequency of use of strategies in six main categories, Table 2 below shows the application of all language learning strategies used by ethnic students at Thai Nguyen University. No strategy groups were reported as “never or almost never used”. In other words, 527 ethnic students at TNU used all six categories of learning strategies at a medium level. Basically, the ethnic students actively applied a variety of strategies to facilitate acquiring English. As can be seen in Table 2.3, ethnic students reported using metacognitive strategies more frequently than other strategies (M=3.42, SD=.53), and this was followed by compensation strategies (M=3.28, SD=.45), social strategies (M=3.22, SD=.61), memory strategies and affective strategies (M=3.19, SD=.45). Cognitive strategies ranked the lowest (M=3.04, SD=.32). In other EFL studies, too, metacognitive and compensation strategies were found to be among the most highly frequently used strategies and memory strategies, the least frequently used ones, as in Wharton, 2002; Yang,1994; Oh, 1992; and Green, 1991, to name a few.

Table 2: Frequency of Use of Strategies in the Six Main Categories

	N	Mean	S.D	Frequency Category
Memory Category	527	3,19	,45	Medium use
Cognitive Category	527	3,04	,32	Medium use
Compensation Category	527	3,28	,53	Medium use
Metacognitive Category	527	3,42	,45	Medium use
Affective Category	527	3,19	,57	Medium use
Social Category	527	3,22	,61	Medium use

In finding the relationship between the ethnic students' choice of language learning strategies and their perceptual learning styles, One-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) was applied to test whether there was a significant relationship between students' English learning strategies and learning style preferences, and the significant level was set at $p < .05$. Table 3 reveals the means and standard deviations of the subjects' overall strategy use by the six learning style preference groups. The mean scores show that the visual learning style students use the fewest strategies (M = 3.18), whereas the kinesthetic and group learning style students use the most (M = 3.21). However, the difference did not reach significance level (F = 0.44, $p > .05$), i.e., no significant differences were found

V. CONCLUSION

among the six learning style groups in overall strategy use. According to “good language learner” studies, good language learners use learning strategies more often and are able to apply the appropriate learning strategies to their own learning style, personality, and the demands of the task. In contrast, the less successful language learners sometimes are not able to match the appropriate strategies with the task during the learning process. In the present study, the results showed that none of the six learning style groups used significantly more strategies than any other group.

Table 3 Overall Students Learning Style Preferences

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Visual	135	3,18	,18
Tactile	103	3,20	,20
Auditory	63	3,19	,21
Kinesthetic	65	3,21	,21
Group	78	3,21	,18
Individual	83	3,20	,20
F= .44, p = .81 ($p > .05$)			

All in all, the results showed that learning styles did not have much influence on the learning strategy use. Those results did not support the previous studies. Based on Wen and Johnson's (1997) statement, they proposed that learning styles would influence the strategy use, but in the present study, the results did not show this conclusion. However, for more detailed discussion, among the six types of learning strategies, there is significant difference existing on social strategy and learning styles. From the findings, the researchers found that learners with auditory learning style use more social strategies than those with visual learning style. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), the main characteristics of visual are those who prefer to have information presented in graphs, maps, plots and illustrations, whereas auditory learners are those who depend on hearing and speaking as a main way of learning. Auditory learners must be able to hear what is being said in order to understand and may have difficulty with instructions that are written. They rely on listening input such as conversation to sort through the information that is sent to them.

In sum, the results of the present study showed that TNU ethnic students were medium strategy users. However, one strategy category, i.e., metacognitive category, was used at a high frequency as the most frequently used strategy

category. Memory and cognitive strategies were used as the least frequently used categories by the participants of the study. In addition, learning styles did not have much influence on the learning strategy use. However, the relationship between students' choices of strategy use and learning styles is still complex because it is bi-directional - it cannot be clearly determined whether learning strategy use is the cause or result of students' learning styles.

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