

Language Learning Strategies Employed by EFL Science-oriented University Students in Vietnam: An Exploratory Study

Duong Duc Minh, Channarong Intaraprasert

School of Foreign Languages
Institute of Social Technology, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand

Abstract- The present language learning strategy classification is based on data reported by 30 science-oriented students from 6 different universities in the north of Vietnam through the semi-structured interviews. Based on the language learning purposes to be achieved, the Language Learning Strategy Inventory (LLSI) comprises two main categories, i.e. specific language skills enhancement and general language knowledge enhancement. As a result, the specific language skills enhancement consists of 43 emergent individual strategies, and the general language knowledge enhancement consists of 11 individual strategies. The researchers always keep in mind that the present LLSI is not comprehensive and may not cover all strategies that science-oriented students have employed. However, the proposed LLSI may be considered to be representative of the language learning strategies employed by science-oriented students in the north of Vietnam.

Index Terms- language learning strategies, science-oriented students, language learning strategy classification.

I. INTRODUCTION

English language learning and teaching in Vietnam nowadays is considered as the key to open the world of academic and economic development. As a result, English has been the foreign language of the first choice for almost all learners. English is a compulsory subject from the 3rd grade in primary schools to tertiary level (MOET, 2010). It is also one of the four foreign languages (English, French, Russian, and Chinese) in the entrance examination for the higher education level.

According to Oxford (1990, p. 17), “there is no complete agreement on exactly what strategies are; how many strategies exist; how they should be defined, demarcated, and categorized; and whether it is – or ever will be possible to create a real, scientifically validated hierarchy of strategies; therefore, classifications conflicts are inevitable”. Similarly, Ellis (1994) affirms that learning strategies differ in a number of ways, reflecting the particular subjects that the researchers worked with, the setting, and the particular interests of the researcher. It is clear that, different researchers have different ways or their own criteria or system in classifying language learning strategies. As a result, their language learning strategy classifications may be based on their personal experiences as a teacher (e.g. Stern 1983, and 1992), their own language learning strategy investigations (e.g. Stern, 1992; Rubin 1975; O’Malley and

Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990; Coleman 1991; and Intaraprasert 2000), or their reviews of their own research works or other researchers theories (e.g. Rubin 1975; Stern 1983, 1992; Carver 1984, and Ellis and Sinclair 1989).

Language learning strategy research works conducted with Vietnamese learners tended to explore overall strategies which Vietnamese learners employed or which strategies introduced by Oxford (1990) that Vietnamese learners reported employing frequently. Some other research works, simply explored strategies employed in learning the English language, and how these strategies affected the students’ language achievement, e.g. Huyền (2004) and Hiền (2007). Furthermore, few studies on language learning strategies conducted with Vietnamese students learning English as a foreign language and concentrated on how to become successful learners by employing language strategies (Diệp, 1997). A few studies put the focus on variables that affected the choice of language learning strategies such as gender, major fields of study as in Khuong (1997); Hằng (2008). No research work has been conducted to explore types of strategies reported by science-oriented university students exclusively. Therefore, the present language learning strategy classification is based on data reported by 30 science-oriented students from 6 different universities in the north of Vietnam. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit information about language learning strategies employed by learners to go about learning English.

II. RESEARCH ELABORATION

A. Terms Used in the Study

- Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies (LLSs) in the present investigation are defined as conscious behaviours or thought processes performing learning actions, whether they are observable (behaviours or techniques) or unobservable (thoughts or mental process), that Vietnamese science-oriented university students themselves reported using in order to enhance their English language learning.

- Science-oriented Students

‘Science-oriented students’ in this investigation refers to the undergraduate students who undertake their full-time degree majoring in ‘Science and Technology’ and ‘Health Science’ in six universities in the north of Vietnam. These universities include: Thainguyen University of Technology (TNUT), Thainguyen Medical and Pharmacy University (TMPU), Hanoi

Medical University (HMU), Hanoi University of Science and Technology (HUST), Haiphong University (HPU), and Haiphong Medical University (HPMU). These students are undertaking their English courses in the first two years at their universities as required by the curriculum.

B. Research Objectives

The present investigation aims at examining and identifying types of language learning strategies employed by science-oriented students in learning English as a foreign language in northern Vietnamese universities.

The present investigation has been designed to conduct under the 'theory-after-research' manner as termed by Punch (1998, p.16) which refers to research work that ends up with a theory explained from the data the researcher has collected. The present investigation does not aim to reconfirm or test any theory about language learning strategy use by language learners.

C. Participants

The data were collected between April and June, 2011 from 30 science-oriented students who were purposively selected from 6 universities in the north of Vietnam. These universities were randomly stratified from different geographical regions to take part in the data collection. Two universities (one Science and Technology, one Health science) in each region (the northern central, the northern midland and the north east) were selected. The interviewees were the students who were studying EAP or ESP course, or already finished that course in the previous semester. The selection of students was to ensure they would provide enough useful information for the researchers to generate a language learning strategy inventory. Among the 30 students who were interviewed, 15 were Health Science students, and 15 were Science and Technology students. The Science and Technology students were 12 males and 3 females, and the Health Science were 6 males and 9 females.

D. Instruments

The one-on-one semi-structured interviews were used as the main method for data collection in the present investigation. The interview questions were mainly designed to ask how they dealt with learning the English language. Further, they were asked if they encountered any problems and how they solved the problems. The content of the interview questions partly emerged from the related literature review, available research works in the field of language learning strategies, and partly through the researcher's personal experience as a language learner and a language teacher. What follows is the summary of the sample interview questions for the present investigation:

Questions 1, 2: background information of the interviewee's name, and field of study

Questions 3, 4: an elicitation of the interviewee's language learning strategies in every single skill

Questions 5, 6: an investigation of interviewee's opinion about what he or she finds difficult in learning English and how those problems were solved

Question 7: an investigation of each student's comments about English learning and teaching from their experience.

E. Procedure

The first semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Science and Technology students at TNUT in the northern midland. Everything was smooth for arranging an appointment because the students were very co-operative. However, some

students seemed to be worried because they thought that they would be interviewed in English. The researchers had to ensure them that the language used for the interview was Vietnamese which seemed to make them feel more comfortable and confident.

While conducting the semi-structured interview, apart from the interview skills which were trained and experienced in the pilot stage, the researchers always kept in mind what Denscombe (2003) suggested that setting a relaxed atmosphere in which the students feel free to open up on the topic is necessary. In addition, Measor (1985) indicated that one way to build a good relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees is to ask their names or nick names. Therefore, the researchers followed these points and addressed the students by their name like what the researchers did in class when teaching. It was found very useful since the students felt relaxed and confident when responding to the interview questions. During the interview, as stated by Robson (2002), the researchers also listened to the student more than spoke; put questions in a straightforward, clear and non-threatening way to the students; didn't ask leading questions; looked satisfied with students' responses, and made students feel that they were understandable and easy to talk to. The researchers did the same interview process to the other five Science and Technology and Health Science universities in the northern midland, the northern central, and the north east respectively.

F. Analysis

After having finished the interview process, the researchers started transcribing each interview recording verbatim. Then, the researchers translated all the transcription from Vietnamese to English. The interview translated-version was then checked by the researchers' colleagues who are English teachers and have taught English for at least 5 years. The next process was to analyze data obtained after translation in order to discover language learning strategies reported to be employed by these science-oriented university students.

When all the interview data obtained were transcribed and translated, the researchers started to generate the preliminary language learning strategy inventory by doing the following steps:

1. The researchers carefully read through the interview data regarding language learning strategies reported by 30 science-oriented students from 6 universities to get a whole picture of how they used LLSs in learning the English language.

2. Each language learning behavior or strategy which was consistent with the working definitions of the present investigation was accordingly identified, and the codes were then given to such behavior and strategy. The researchers had to be very carefully at this step to ensure that every single reported strategy or behavior was identified.

3. From the list of every single reported language learning strategy, the researchers started to look at the similarities and differences among the reported statements. It was found that the interviewees produced altogether 417 statements about language learning behaviours or strategies to achieve or to enhance the target language. The researchers started to think how to group and categorise these statements.

4. The researchers realized that it was impossible to include all of the 417 behaviour or strategies in the language learning strategy

classification. As a result, the researchers had to group these 417 statements according to the similarities of the context or situation in which the learning behaviours or strategies reported employing by 30 science-oriented students. In this step, the researchers also had to deal with the question how to classify these reported statements. Should the researchers follow the classification system like those of Rubin (1981), Ellis and Sinclair (1989), Oxford (1990), Coleman (1991) or Intaraprasert (2000) classification system which was based on the purpose of strategy use? The researchers decided to try the preliminary classification based on the reported purposes of strategy use. Initially, there were 74 language learning behaviours or strategies remaining, and they were categorized roughly under two main categories: the strategies to enhance the specific language skills, and the strategies to enhance the general language knowledge.

5. In general, the reported 417 statements were employed to enhance the process of learning the target language. The researchers considered these strategies according to the purpose of the students when employing the reported strategies; it meant that the researchers looked at the 'what' students had done to improve their language learning, not the 'how' students had done to achieve the specific purpose. For example, one student reported "I looked up every new word before I read the reading text, this helped me understand the text clearer ...[translated]", another student reported "I had to read mechanical engineering materials, it was too difficult to understand the text so I found a similar reading document in Vietnamese to read, therefore, I could comprehend the reading text in my major ...[translated]" The researchers found that these strategies were employed to comprehend the specific reading text, not to improve their reading skill. As a result, the researchers had to read very carefully every single statement, not only to clarify the specific purpose of each action but also to make sure these reported statements in each group shared the similar characteristics in the context or situation in which they were reported to be used. Finally, based on the 417 statements, 74 main groups emerged. It was not easy to categorise each strategy into a suitable group and to find the suitable name to cover most because some strategies reported being employed seemed to overlap with others.

6. At this step, the researchers did some revision and had a discussion with colleagues. After the discussion, the researchers found that some reported strategies tended to be communication strategies. According to Tarone (1980); Ellis (1994); Cohen (1998), 'communication strategies' are related to language use rather than language learning. The communication strategies are used to enable language users to organize their utterances as effectively as possible to get their messages across to particular listeners. Tarone (1980) also proposed 3 criteria to determine whether a strategy is for communication or learning which include: a) a speaker desires to communicate a message to a listener; b) the speaker believes the linguistic or sociolinguistic structure desired to communicate a message is not shared with the listener; and c) the speaker chooses to either avoid or attempt to communicate a message. Taking into account these criteria, 20 of 74 language learning strategies were excluded from the language learning strategy groups.

7. The researchers started to look at every individual strategy in each group to specify clearly the purpose again and came up with nine purposes. Appropriate names for purposes of strategy use

were initially given, and then the researchers started to match strategy items and each purpose. At this step, the researchers started to reconsider how these nine groups of strategy use could be classified further. The researchers looked through all these groups again and again to find whether there was a common characteristic these purposes might share. Consequently, the proposed 'Language Learning Strategy Inventory' with two main categories was identified. These include strategies 1) to enhance specific language skills; and 2) to enhance general language knowledge. The first main category comprises 4 purposes for core language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and 3 purposes for supportive language skills (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary). The second main category comprises 2 purposes which are media reliance and non-media reliance strategies to enhance general language knowledge.

III. FINDINGS

In classifying language learning strategies for the present investigation, it was evident that the LLSs in both categories were supportive of each other. That is, the strategies which students reported employing in order to enhance the specific language skills may help them improve their general language knowledge. For example, the strategies to enhance the knowledge of vocabulary which students reported employing may help to improve the reading skill. It means that, there are no clear-cuts at all among the strategy use. Therefore, the language learning strategies under the two main categories have a spiral rather than linear relationship.

The proposed 'Language Learning Strategy Inventory' with two main categories was generated and presented as follows:

I. Specific Language Skills Enhancement

1. Core Language Skills

1.1 Strategies for Speaking Skill Enhancement

- Participating in discussions in groups or classes, or clubs
- Self-practising with non-course books
- Seeking an opportunity to communicate with foreigners or native speakers of English
- Doing a part-time job at tour offices, hotels or restaurants
- Taking an extra (speaking) class at a language centre
- Talking to oneself
- Starting conversations with other people in English.
- Encouraging oneself to speak English even when one is afraid of making a mistake
- Asking an interlocutor to correct a mistake when speaking English

1.2. Strategies for Reading Skill Enhancement

- Reading English brochures, leaflets or billboards
- Reading materials of one's major in English language
- Reading short stories or funny stories in English
- Reading instructions or manuals in English
- Looking for opportunities to read as much as possible in English

1.3. Strategies for Listening Skill Enhancement

- Listening to English songs
- Listening to radio programs in English
- Watching television programs in English

- Attending extra classes where native English speakers teach the English language
- Seeking an opportunity to listen to the English language
- Listening to the recording repetitively

1.4. Strategies for Writing Skill Enhancement

- Writing e-mail, diary, notes, messages, letters, or reports in English
- Practising writing sentences in English
- Comparing one's writing with friends'
- Seeking assistance from other people, such as teachers or friends
- Doing extra writing exercises from non-course books
- Having extra writing tutorials

2. Supportive Language Skills

2.1. Strategies for Pronunciation Enhancement

- Imitating native speakers
- Checking one's recorded pronunciation against the recordings
- Using a dictionary to check one's pronunciation
- Asking friends or teachers to help check the pronunciation
- Practising pronunciation in front of the mirror

2.2. Strategies for Grammar Enhancement

- Doing extra grammar exercises from non-course books
- Taking notes on grammar points
- Linking newly-learned grammar structures with previously-learned ones
- Asking the teacher for clarification when appropriate
- Having extra grammar tutorials

2.3. Strategies for Vocabulary Enhancement

- Memorising words in English
- Learning words' formations or words' roots
- Using stickers or flash cards
- Translating English words into Vietnamese or Vietnamese words into English
- Grouping new vocabulary items according to their similarity in meanings or spellings
- Using new vocabulary items to converse or to compete with peers
- Playing word games

II. General Language Knowledge Enhancement

1. Media Reliance Strategies

- Using a mobile phone or a tape recorder or a compact disc
- Joining a forum or a blog or a chat room
- Making use of online resources, such as e-library, online dictionary or Google Translate
- Singing 'karaoke' in English
- Self-practising with commercial software

2. Non-media Reliance Strategies

- Creating English learning atmosphere for oneself
- Trying to find as many ways as one can to use English
- Asking teachers how to learn English effectively
- Trying to learn about the culture of native English speakers
- Practicing general English with friends

- Noticing one's English mistakes and use that information

IV. CONCLUSION

The language learning strategy inventory for the present investigation emerged from the content analysis of the one-on-one semi-structured interview. Based on the purposes to be achieved, the LLSI comprises two main categories which are specific language skills enhancement and general language knowledge enhancement. The specific language skills enhancement category consists of 43 individual strategies, and the general language knowledge enhancement category consists of 11 individual strategies. The proposed LLSI may be considered to be representative of the LLSs employed by science-oriented students in the north of Vietnam.

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Email address: duongducminh@tnut.edu.vn

AUTHORS

First Author – Duong Duc Minh, PhD candidate, School of Foreign Languages, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand.

Second Author – Channarong Intaraprasert, Assoc Prof. Channarong Intaraprasert, PhD, School of Foreign Languages, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand.

Email address: georgeintara@sut.ac.th