

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

English is becoming the universal language of the world. There are no more questions regarding the immeasurable importance of knowing the English language to all educational pursuits in all parts of the world. English currently enjoys greater prestige and power than any other languages. It is taught all over the world under many different circumstances. Being fluent in English has undeniable advantages. Five hundred million people around the world, the majority of whom are from Asia, use English as an additional language. The demand for the English language was stronger each day as Asia's increasingly growing in its economic. Development has required increased links with the world as well as within Asia itself. They exchange views using English and translated speech and documents on politics, security, economic cooperation and global issues. There is no doubt that learning English is becoming an important component of the overall strategy to develop human resources.

In Thailand, English is taught as a subject from the first grade. It is also compulsory to pass English at university entrance exams. The days when a Thai could excel in the world of business, education, politics or any other undertaking without the knowledge of English are long past. Educated Thais now need a firm and confident grasp of the English language through which they can express themselves and access the huge amount of information that becomes necessary for daily life. As this is the century of globalization, given increasing trend to global communities of knowledge, global use of technology and global directives to problem solving, knowing English which is becoming the global language is in high demand in Thailand. English is becoming not only the medium of global communication, but also the language of academic, scientific research, technological development and language of international trade and negotiations as well as recreation and entertainment. Therefore, teaching students to learn English, which is the skill to directly access information in its original form, is becoming the highlights of the second language learning.

Over the past few decades, teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) has changed tremendously. Curricula, teaching methods, and teaching

materials were also developed to meet the changing needs of the language classroom. During these years, a number of educators and researchers have proposed that teaching would be more effective if teachers and educators took account of differences in students' learning strategies because it is one of the main factors that help determine how and how well our students learn a second or foreign language.

Learning strategies are "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information, 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, 2001, p.166). In another way, learning strategies are external skills that students use, often consciously, to improve their learning (Reid, 1995). They are the ways in which learners try to understand and remember new information, e.g. techniques for learning new words in a foreign language (Jordan, 1997).

In addition, as a result of learner-centered curriculum and learner-centered approach in teaching language, learners are now increasingly encouraged to develop their autonomy and to take charge of their own learning. Harmer (1991) and Nunan (1991) support the

view that it is necessary for learners to take an active role in their own learning.

Researchers proposed a suggestion that helping students develop appropriate learning strategies can allow them to become autonomous learners (Nunan, 1991). Although language learning strategies of students are accepted as one of the most important factors in learning a foreign or second language, many second language classrooms are still taught without paying any attention to language learning strategies. Many teachers and students around the world, especially in Asia, are still not aware of language learning strategies and how they can help students in learning a second language. Although there are researches on language learning strategies of EFL students from Asian countries including Thailand, this issue has not received enough attention to reach the eyes and ears of EFL teachers and students.

According to the modern Thai education system by 1999 Education Act, Thai education system comprises of four levels. They are pre-school, primary, secondary, and higher education. The basic education is twelve years core curriculum, from primary education to secondary education. Thai Ministry of Education also placed emphasis on English as one of the most important subjects. Nowadays, English language education starts at

Grade 1. The new learner-centered approach is now being introduced in public schools all over the country. Students studied English for many years in school. During those years they somehow passed the tests and went on to the next, more difficult level. But after all the hard work, headache, and frustration many students found themselves unable to speak or to write more than a short sentence. They found their grammar still incorrect. The worst scenario for them would be to be being approached by a foreigner for a conversation.

Many students were left unable to understand why they are not successful in learning English. It is a huge waste of time and money for most of them. For these reasons the present study on language learning strategies of Thai English major students was decided to be carried out. This study aimed to provide more understanding towards language learning strategies of EFL college students. In particular, it investigated the extent to which EFL students employed different learning approaches in their use of learning strategies to learn English.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the language learning strategies most frequently used by Thai EFL college students?
2. What are the factors affecting their learning strategy selections?

Significance of the Study

The research has both theoretical and pedagogical significance. Although studies have been carried out on language learning strategies around the world, and in spite of the increasing popularity of the research in this area, the topic of learning strategies is still a new research area in Southeast Asia. Many EFL students are not aware of their own learning strategies and the benefits of knowing the right strategies for them to learn English. Teachers and scholars usually agree that the teaching of English language in Thailand has not been successful. Student's English proficiency level is still very low after at least eight years of formal studying in school. Many students found themselves not being to cope with the level of reading demanded of them when they

reach university level. Spoken language is also another problem for them. Even when they complete their university education when spoken to them in English instead of responding, they usually withdraw themselves in embarrassment because of their lack of confidence. All of these factors indicate that little has been done to investigate how learners actually learn the English language offered by their perspective schooling in their school days. This research was an attempt to look deeper beyond the system. It focused on the students and their learning experiences. It paid attention to how they learn, what they use to approach the English language, and their attitude towards learning English. The current study would help educators, teachers and students to understand the strategies that students used to reach the point where they are now able to communicate in English. The most general finding among the investigation of language learning strategies was that the use of appropriate language learning strategies leads to improved proficiency or achievement (O'Malley, & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). The present study would give new understanding and enable students to continue as better learners of English and educators, and teachers to develop a curriculum that enable students to learn by using their own language learning strategies.

Furthermore, there is a great deal of individuality in the way learners choose their learning strategies. Many factors affect the selection of strategies. The understanding of EFL students' strategies selections would yield pedagogical merits such as reduction of teacher and student frustration, better accommodation of varieties of learners in classrooms, and higher achievement for student in learning English and for teacher in the teaching of English.

The study of learning strategies holds considerable promise, both for language pedagogy and for explaining individual differences in second language learning. It is probably true to say, however, that it is still in its infancy. For this reason, perhaps, discussions of learning strategies typically conclude with the problems that have surfaced and that need to be addressed before progress can be made (Ellis, 1994, p.558).

In general, the information obtained from the current study would also help teachers to consider what information and support is most valuable for students. Knowledge of how students go about their learning can be useful information for teachers, study counselors, and curriculum developers.

The information from the current study, which took place in a Thai University, would also help teachers, material developers, and curriculum designers in Thailand to develop teaching methods, materials, and curriculum, which would be more appropriate for Thai students.

Definitions of Terms

Several definitions can be found regarding Language learning strategies and its applications. For the purpose of the current study, these terms were defined to help clarify the intent of this study and to prevent any misperceptions that could possibly occur. Some key terms that need clarification are defined below.

Learning strategies Learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.

learning strategies dealing with a new language are called direct strategies. They are beneficial to students

because they help store and recover information. These strategies help learners to produce language even when there is a gap in knowledge. They also help learners to understand and use the language.

English as a foreign
Language (EFL)

The teaching and learning of English in communities where it is not widely used for communication.

Memory strategies

Strategies such as grouping or using imagery, have a highly specific function: helping students store and retrieve new information.

Cognitive strategies

Strategies such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means.

Compensation strategies

Strategies like guessing or using synonyms, allow learners to use the language despite

their often large gaps in knowledge.

Self-evaluation

Checking the outcomes of one's own language learning against a standard after the learning has been completed.

Self-monitoring

Checking one's comprehension during listening or reading, or checking the accuracy and/or appropriateness of one's oral or written production while it is taking place.

Metacognitive strategies

They allow learners to control their own cognition that is, to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating.

Affective strategies

These strategies help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes.

Social strategies

Social strategies help students learn through interaction with others (Oxford, 1990, p. 144).

Delimitations of the Study

The current study contains two main important delimitations. Firstly, it did not focus on the detail language learning strategies such as vocabulary learning strategies or reading strategies, but it only attempted to identify the language learning strategies in general. Secondly, the study used a questionnaire, the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning: SILL, to assess students existing strategies and the interview to identify what affect their selection of strategies.

Assumption of the Study

This study was carried out on the basis of the following assumptions:

1. The study assumed that the subjects answered the questions in the questionnaire and participated in the interview to the best of their knowledge.

2. The subjects answered the questions in the questionnaire and participated in the interview without anxiety, pressure, or fear.

Organization of the Study

The current is presented in five chapters. Chapter One indicates the statement of the problem of the study, research questions, significance of the study, definitions of terms, delimitations, and assumptions of the study. Chapter Two presents the theoretical views of language learning strategies and the review of the related literature. Chapter Three consists of the research procedure, which is divided into five sections: participants, materials, instruments, data collection and data analysis. Chapter Four presents and discusses the results of the study in answering to the research questions, "What are the language learning strategies that are most frequently used by EFL college students?", and "What are the factors affecting their learning strategy choice?" The last chapter, Chapter Five, summarizes the study as well as provides recommendations for the future research in the area of language learning strategies.