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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Language Learning Strategies Employed by Non-English Majors at Nong Lam University, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
Learning strategies have a strong effect on students' success in foreign language learning. In fact, they are considered tools for active and self-directed engagement, which is vital for developing communicative competence. Language learning strategies also enable students to take responsibility for their own learning progress. This study was carried out to identify the preferred language learning strategies which are most frequently employed by non-English major students at Nong Lam University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research was conducted with 725 undergraduate students with a descriptive quantitative method. The data was collected using a Vietnamese questionnaire adapted from Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) originally developed by Oxford (1990). The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 software was used to analyze the data obtained from the questionnaire. The findings revealed that non-English majors used language learning strategies at a medium level of frequency. They didn't equally use all 6 strategies in their learning, which probably impeded their progress of language learning. The most frequently used strategies by the learners were metacognitive strategies, followed by memory, affective, cognitive compensation and social strategies as the least preferred ones. Pedagogical recommendations for lecturers are also discussed in the paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning is a life-long process that almost every human being takes part in. However, the outcomes of this process vary from one to another, primarily originating from several factors including learning strategies. In the process of learning foreign languages, being aware of the wide range of language learning strategies and using them effectively can boost students' confidence and as a result, help them become more independent from their language instructors as autonomous and efficient learners. Moreover, good learners can progress by exploiting the whole spectrum of strategies that are available to them (Rubin, 1975).

Strategies significantly vary by individuals as they derive from personal awareness and motivations; and more importantly, they act as a major drive for one's educational process because strategic actions fostered by critical learning strategies are not limited to classrooms; and on the basis of these activities, many learners have achieved their goals of mastery through efforts of self-motivated learning (Brown, 2007). Oxford (2003) shared similar findings about the impacts of learning strategies on learning outcomes. When a learner chooses learning strategies which closely correspond with his or her learning style, these strategies would considerably be preferential for active and purposeful learning.

Language teaching and learning have been a major concern of learners and scholars worldwide, especially in the time of open economy and global integration. Proficiency in a second or foreign language becomes a fundamental condition for each individual's education development, and subsequently a nation. Such pressing demand requires research to investigate the issues of language learning strategies so that curriculum makers and language learners have a sound footing for decisions to raise the general language proficiency. Cohen (1998) looked at the distinction between learning strategies and learning styles, then explored practical methods to determine appropriate strategies for individual language learners and encouraged higher frequency of strategy-based instructions in learning curriculum. This perspective was reinforced by the findings of Chang & Liu (2013) that appropriate use of learning strategies, mostly audio and visual, may give learners of different proficiency levels added incentives to improve their learning. In addition, Al-Hebaishi (2012, p. 518) underlined the significance of learning strategies on the English learning outcomes with the conclusion, "Learning strategies are significantly related to academic performance". Both English language teachers and learners should take learning strategies into account in order to decide appropriate pedagogy and to use evenly matching tools, thereby maximizing the language learning efficiency.

Language teaching and learning in Vietnam is facing critical problems that are obviously reflected with figures. In the 2020 national high school examination, over three fourths of high school seniors of more than 900,000 took the English test, 63 percent of whom scored less than 5 out of ten. The overall average score was 4.58, the lowest compared to other subjects in the examinations (Ministry of Education and Training, 2020). Moreover, similar situations can be easily seen among university undergraduate students in Vietnam. A variety of measures and efforts of amelioration, including innovation of curriculum or the outcome framework are being taken by universities nationwide, but the question still remains when a high proportion of university graduates are evaluated as incompetent at communicating effectively in English. Despite the fact that numerous investments and policies about language learning have been made and put into implementation, the outcomes are still far from satisfactory. Of many reasons that may lead to this disappointing reality, language learning strategies, which have long been ignored, should be mentioned. Given the previous issues, the study of language learning strategies is regarded as more vital than ever. This research study hopefully aims to provide meaningful fact-findings to increase the efficiency of language learning.

The purpose of this research was to figure out the language learning strategies that were most frequently employed by non- English major students at Nong Lam University, Ho Chi Minh City (NLU-HCM), Vietnam, so the main research question is as follows: Which language learning strategies are mostly employed by non-English major students at NLU-HCM?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Language learning strategies

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been variously defined by many language scholars. Rubin (1975), who is the pioneer in the field of LLS, defined learning strategies as the techniques, methods, or devices that language learners used to acquire knowledge. Similarly, Bialystok (1978) states that LLS are methods that learners use to manipulate existing information to improve their language competence. According to Chamot (1987), LLS are techniques, methods, or intentional actions that learners use to facilitate the learning process. Oxford (1990) outlines that LLS are specific actions, steps, or techniques that language students took to enhance their progress in developing skills. More recently, Cohen (1998, p. 4) defines that LLS are "processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about that language". Leilei (2016, p. 51), after discussing previous definitions, holds that "learning strategies refer to the methods, rules, approaches, steps and actions used by learners to improve the efficiency of language learning".

2.2. Classification of Learning Strategies

Together with the various definitions of learning strategies, Language Learning Strategies have also been classified by various researchers such as O'Malley et al. (1985), Rubin (1987), Oxford (1990). But most of the attempts to classify language learning strategies represent the same categorizations without major improvements.

O'Malley et al. (1985) separates language learning strategies into three groups: Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, and Socio-affective Strategies. Rubin (1987) likewise classifies Language Learning Strategies into three categories named Learning Strategies, Communication Strategies, and Social Strategies. These three types of strategies contribute directly or indirectly to language learning.

The most comprehensive LLS classification established so far is given by Oxford (1990). She groups learning strategies into two major categories, the direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies then in turn are subdivided into Memory Strategies, Cognitive Strategies and Compensation Strategies. Indirect strategies are as well composed of three subgroups Metacognitive Strategies, Affective Strategies, and Social Strategies. Her classification is very much overlapping with the classification of O'Malley et al. (1985).

2.3. Previous studies

There have been numerous studies exploring language learning strategies employed by university students. Results indicate that students use all six language learning strategies: metacognitive, compensation, social, memory, cognitive, and affective strategy in the language learning course at different levels (Chang & Liu, 2013; Hakan et al., 2015; Kunasaraphan, 2015; Lestari & Wahyudin, 2020; Mandasari & Oktaviani, 2018; Rustam et al., 2015). Furthermore, successful students mostly use metacognitive strategies while unsuccessful students prefer mainly social strategy and compensation strategies. Ismail & Khatib (2013), Wahdah et al. (2018) and Lestari & Wahyudin (2020) found that metacognitive strategies were the most often used and cognitive strategies least used by the students in their studies while Al-Buainain (2010), Lestari & Wahyudin (2020) mentioned affective strategy as the least used. In this regard, Nhem (2019) asserts that students mostly use cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. In contrast, Mam (2003) in his study with Cambodian teenage learners of English showed that the successful learners used four specific strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation and social strategies whereas the less successful learners tended to use metacognitive and affective strategies. Mahdi Mutar (2018) also confirms that cognitive strategies and memory strategies are the most frequently used tactic.

Numerous studies have also been conducted to categorize the levels of strategy exploitation based on Oxford's (1990) classification. Charoento (2017) surveyed 392 undergraduates at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand to investigate what language learning strategies were used. The results indicated that the strategies most used by learners were compensation strategies while the least were cognitive strategies and that the students were classified as low-to medium strategy users. Mahdi Mutar (2018) surveyed Iraqi Upper Secondary School Students and reported that students have shown medium frequency levels of language learning strategies usage. Similarly, Kunasaraphan (2015) stated that the students who enrolled at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, used language learning strategies at medium level. In Cambodia, Seng & Khleang (2014) investigated the strategy used by the students registered at Meanchey and Build Bright University. The results revealed that the students reported high frequency levels of strategy use. Al-Buainain (2010) similarly affirmed that the surveyed students used learning strategies at high to medium frequency levels.

Sun's (2013) research on non-English major students in Beijing Information Science and Technology University revealed that employment of learning strategies leads to enhancement of learning effectiveness and thus improving English test scores. More specifically, Quibilan (2017) confirmed that there were significant relationships between the students' performance in English and the usage of four subcategories of learning strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and affective strategies. Pannak & Chiramanee (2011), on the other hand, found a significant relationship between six categories of LLS and language proficiency. Many other researchers have also acknowledged the relationship between one or more categories of LLS and language proficiency (Ketabi & Mohammadi, 2012).

In Vietnam, limited research has been carried out to investigate the use of language learning strategies employed by Vietnamese students. Nguyen et al. (2012) in their study "Language Learning Strategies used by Non-English Majors at Can Tho University" aimed to examine the kind of language learning strategies employed and gender differences in using language learning strategies of 201 non-English freshman of Can Tho University. The findings revealed that the research participants reported a medium level of language learning strategies usage. The strategies most used by learners were metacognitive strategies while the least were social. Another study by Le (2017) on the language learning strategies used by Ethnic non-English Major Students at a university in the North of Vietnam also indicated that the students employed language strategies in a moderate way and that metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used among all the six categories of language learning strategies, followed by compensation, social, memory, affective and cognitive.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 725 non-English major students at NLU-HCM, who were selected using the convenient technique.

3.2. Research instrument

In the present study, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) was used to collect primary data. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is a 50-item self-reporting questionnaire, in which 50 items are divided into six categories or subscales: Memory (9 items, from item 1 to 9), Cognitive (14 items, from item 10 to 23), Compensation (6 items, from item 24 to 29), Metacognitive (9 items, from item 30 to 38), Affective (6 items, from item 39 to 44), Social (6 items, from item 45 to 50).

Respondents were asked to report about their learning strategies as honestly as they can on the five-point Likert scale: (1) Never or almost never true of me; (2) Usually not true of me; (3) Somewhat true of me; (4) Usually true of me;(5) Always or almost always true of me.

Cronbach's Alpha analysis was used to find the reliability of the instrument. The Cronbach's Alpha of the six subscales memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, social were 0.83, 0.89, 0.77, 0.88, 0.82, 0.82 respectively which means that the reliability of the instrument is acceptable.

3.3. Data analysis and interpretation

The SPSS (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences) version 22.0 was used to perform descriptive statistical analyses. Mean scores, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were calculated to describe the language learning strategies (overall strategy and strategy categories) used by students.

Mean scores of each category were calculated and interpreted as proposed by Oxford (1990) as follow: Mean from 4.5 to 5 indicated that these strategies were always or almost always used; Mean from 3.5 to 4.4 indicated that these strategies were usually used; Mean from 2.5 to 3.4 indicated that these strategies were sometimes used; Mean from 1.5 to 2.4 indicated that these strategies were generally not used; Mean from 1.0 to 1.4 indicated that these strategies were never or almost never used. "Always or almost always used" strategies and "usually used" strategies then were grouped as "high-frequency" levels of strategy use; Strategies sometimes used were grouped as "medium"; and generally, not used and never or almost never used strategies were grouped as "low-frequency" levels of strategy use.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

Demographic characteristics

Table 1 reveals that the predominant gender of the student subjects was female (66.9%) while the proportion of male students was considerably limited (only 33.1%). Of all 725 respondents, most of them (323) were first-year students, accounting for 44.6%, compared with 35.3% of second-year students. The number of more senior students who took part in the study was not high. As can be seen from the table, a large number of the respondents (528) came from rural areas, taking up 72.8%. This can be explained with the specific characteristics of their majors, Agriculture and Forestry.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic characteristics

		Count	**%**
Gender	Male	240	33.1
	Female	485	66.9
Year of study	Fifth year	57	7.9
	Fourth year	62	8.6
	Third year	27	3.7
	Second year	256	35.3
	First year	323	44.6
Place of origin	Rural	528	72.8
	Urban	197	27.2

Analysis of students' learning strategies

Memory strategy

The category of *Memory strategies* is subdivided into four sets: creating mental linkage (technique 1, 2 and 9); applying images and sounds (technique 3, 4, 5 and 6); reviewing well (technique 8); and employing actions (technique 7). As seen in Table 2, students at NLU-HCM moderately used these four strategy sets. However, among 4 sets, strategy 2 and 4 were mostly used by 259 out of 750 students, equivalent to 35% believing that using new English words in a sentence can help them remember the meaning of the words. In addition to making use of mental links, 35% of the participants knew how to create a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used so as to learn vocabulary. The overall results also reveal that the numbers of responses of agreement and strong agreement regarding the remaining techniques are very high. It means that most students in the research used memory strategies to help them memorize the English words they learnt.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of memory strategy

Statements		ANT	UNT	SWT	UTS	AAT	Mean	Frequency of the use of strategy	S.D
1. I think of the relationship between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	Count	17	74	285	272	77	3.44	Sometimes used	.897
	%	2.3	10.2	39.3	37.5	10.6			
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	Count	28	101	232	259	105	3.43	Sometimes used	1.023
	%	3.9	13.9	32.0	35.7	14.5			
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me memorize the word.	Count	41	95	224	249	116	3.42	Sometimes used	1.080
	%	5.7	13.1	30.9	34.3	16.0			
4. I memorize a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	Count	32	112	197	254	130	3.47	Sometimes used	1.088
	%	4.4	15.4	27.2	35.0	17.9			
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.	Count	33	126	244	225	97	3.31	Sometimes used	1.051
	%	4.6	17.4	33.7	31.0	13.4			
6. I use flashcards to memorize new English words.	Count	57	138	187	214	129	3.30	Sometimes used	1.192
	%	7.9	19.0	25.8	29.5	17.8			
7. I physically act out new English words.	Count	43	122	249	215	96	3.27	Sometimes used	1.076
	%	5.9	16.8	34.3	29.7	13.2			
8. I review English lessons often.	Count	25	92	283	219	106	3.40	Sometimes used	.997
	%	3.4	12.7	39.0	30.2	14.6			
9. I memorize new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	Count	36	110	252	224	103	3.34	Sometimes used	1.055
	%	5.0	15.2	34.8	30.9	14.2			

Note: ANT: Never or almost never true of me; UNT: Usually not true of me; SWT: Somewhat true of me; UTS: Usually true of me; AAT: Always or almost always true of me; S.D: Std. Deviation

Table 2 also summaries the frequency that students at NLU-HCM used each of the 9 specific strategies in memory strategy. The memory strategy was reported as moderately used among the six categories of language learning strategy with the mean score for 9 sub-strategies under 3.5. The most preferred strategies were "memorizing a new

English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used." (M = 3.47, SD = 1.088), followed by "thinking of relationship between what is already known and new things learnt in English" (M = 3.44, SD = .897), "using new English words in a sentence" (M = 3.42, SD = 1.0230) and "connecting the sound and image of a new word" (M = 3.33, SD = 1.080). The least frequently used strategy among the students at NLU-HCM was "acting out to learn new English words" (M = 3.27, SD = 1.076) although this kind of strategy was considered as being used at medium level.

Cognitive strategy

Cognitive strategy comprises of 13 items showing how they practice English (items 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 20), receive and send messages (item 18); analyze and reason information (items 19, 21 and 22); and create structure for input and output (items 17 and 23). Table 3 shows that the percentage of students who confirmed their agreement with 13 items in cognitive strategy outnumbers that of disagreement. Among these items, however, 37.5% of the students reported that they tried not to translate word-by-word but used the words they know in different ways (246 out of 725, equivalent to 33.9%) to start conversation in English (35.3%) and watched English TV shows to improve and practice their English vocabulary. To deal with unknown words, 238 research participants tried to figure out their meanings by dividing a word into parts that they know. The least used cognitive strategy was '*I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English*.' with 239 out of 725 participants saying that this item was not usually true to them.

In cognitive strategies, the most frequently applied strategy was "I practice the sounds of English" (M = 3.58, SD = 1.025), followed by "I try not to translate word-by-word" (M = 3.54 SD = 1.091); "I say or write new English words several times" (M = 3.51, SD = 1.024) ranked the third in the students' preference while "I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English" was rated as the least preferred strategy.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of cognitive strategy

Statements		ANT	UNT	SWT	UTS	AAT	Mean	Frequency of the use of strategy	S.D
10. I say or write new English words several times.	Count	27	82	238	252	126	3.51	Usually used	1.024
	%	3.7	11.3	32.8	34.8	17.4			
11. I try to talk like native English speakers.	Count	58	138	211	206	112	3.24	Sometimes used	1.164
	%	8.0	19.0	29.1	28.4	15.4			
12. I practice the sounds of English.	Count	28	65	234	255	143	3.58	Usually used	1.025
	%	3.9	9.0	32.3	35.2	19.7			
13. I use the English words I know in different ways.	Count	33	110	246	236	100	3.36	Sometimes used	1.201
	%	4.6	15.2	33.9	32.6	13.8			
14. I start conversations in English.	Count	98	217	256	104	50	2.71	Sometimes used	1.085
	%	13.5	29.9	35.3	14.3	6.9			
15. I watch TV shows in English or go to movies in English.	Count	53	120	238	201	113	3.28	Sometimes used	1.133
	%	7.3	16.6	32.8	27.7	15.6			
16. I read for pleasure in English.	Count	129	228	208	114	46	2.61	Sometimes used	1.136
	%	17.8	31.4	28.7	15.7	6.3			
17. I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English.	Count	135	239	204	106	41	2.56	Sometimes used	1.119
	%	18.6	33.0	28.1	14.6	5.7			
18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	Count	51	106	226	230	112	3.34	Sometimes used	1.118
	%	7.0	14.6	31.2	31.7	15.4			

19. I look for words in my mother tongue that are similar to new words in English.	Count	54	147	251	194	79	3.13	Sometimes used	1.090
	%	7.4	20.3	34.6	26.8	10.9			
20. I try to find patterns in English.	Count	38	118	240	237	92	3.31	Sometimes used	1.054
	%	5.2	16.3	33.1	32.7	12.7			
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	Count	53	139	238	196	99	3.21	Sometimes used	1.123
	%	7.3	19.2	32.8	27.0	13.7			
22. I try not to translate word-by-word.	Count	43	73	198	272	139	3.54	Usually used	1.091
	%	5.9	10.1	27.3	37.5	19.2			
23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	Count	68	163	227	181	86	3.07	Sometimes used	1.149
	%	9.4	22.5	31.3	25.0	11.9			

Note: ANT: Never or almost never true of me; UNT: Usually not true of me; SWT: Somewhat true of me; UTS: Usually true of me; AAT: Always or almost always true of me; S.D: Std. Deviation

Compensation strategy

The compensation strategy consists of 6 items involving guessing meaning (items 24, 27 and 28) and overcoming challenges in speaking and writing (items 25, 26 and 29). 725 research participants were asked which compensation strategy they used to make up for their language deficiency as well as to overcome their unfamiliar language knowledge, also using a five-point Likert-type scale. Table 4 reveals that the 6 items in compensation strategies were moderately used by the students at NLU-HCM. Whenever they had difficulty in understanding unknown words, 596 of them, which accounts for 82,2% of the research participants, made guesses. The other two most frequently used compensation strategies when they had problems with making themselves understood were using gestures during conversation (item 25) and synonyms (item 29). The result shows that the participants know how to deal with language problems when they face some challenges in communicating and learning English.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of compensation strategy

Statements		ANT	UNT	SWT	UTS	AAT	Mean	Frequency of the use of strategy	S.D
24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	Count	33	96	227	250	119	3.45	Sometimes used	1.056
	%	4.6	13.2	31.3	34.5	16.4			
25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	Count	49	111	235	217	113	3.32	Sometimes used	1.115
	%	6.8	15.3	32.4	29.9	15.6			
26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	Count	131	188	203	153	50	2.73	Sometimes used	1.182
	%	18.1	25.9	28.0	21.1	6.9			
27. I read English without looking up every new word.	Count	136	215	218	110	46	2.61	Sometimes used	1.140
	%	18.8	29.7	30.1	15.2	6.3			
28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	Count	66	180	239	175	65	2.99	Sometimes used	1.102
	%	9.1	24.8	33.0	24.1	9.0			
29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	Count	42	122	254	223	84	3.26	Sometimes used	1.052
	%	5.8	16.8	35.0	30.8	11.6			

Note: ANT: Never or almost never true of me; UNT: Usually not true of me; SWT: Somewhat true of me; UTS: Usually true of me; AAT: Always or almost always true of me; S.D: Std. Deviation

It is clear from Table 4 that this group of strategies was moderately employed by the students. In compensation strategies, the most frequently applied strategy was "making guesses to understand unfamiliar words" (M = 3.45, SD = 1.056), followed by "using gestures during conversation when not thinking of a word" (M = 3.32 SD = 1.115). The item "using synonyms when not thinking of an English word" (M = 3.26, SD = 1.052) was ranked the third in the students' preferences while "reading English without looking up every new word" was rated as the least preferred strategy.

Metacognitive strategy

The metacognitive strategy enables students to concentrate on learning (item 32), arrange and plan learning (items 30, 33, 34, 35, 36 and 37) and evaluate their language performance (items 31 and 38). The findings in Table 5 indicate that metacognitive strategies were in high range of frequency use by the surveyed NLU-HCM students. 659 research participants (equivalent to 86,9%) reported that they somewhat or almost desired to find out how to become a better English learner (item 33). It means that the students at NLU-HCM had a strong motivation to study English and metacognitive strategies can help them point out their learning achievement, plan their learning for maximum benefits, and assess their process of learning English. Specifically, Table 5 also shows that over 80% of the student participants stated that they had a clear goal for improving their English skills (item 38). With such an obvious aim, over two thirds of the students knew how to plan their schedule to have enough time for learning English (item 34) and make use of every opportunity to read English materials (item 36). In general, NLU-HCM students are aware of the role of metacognitive strategy in learning and evaluating their learning process.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of metacognitive strategy

Statements		ANT	UNT	SWT	UTS	AAT	Mean	Frequency of the use of strategy	S.D
30. I try to find as many ways as possible to use English.	Count	37	116	272	205	95	3.28	Sometimes used	1.045
	%	5.1	16.0	37.5	28.3	13.1			
31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	Count	30	82	251	248	114	3.46	Sometimes used	1.019
	%	4.1	11.3	34.6	34.2	15.7			
32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	Count	23	53	186	271	192	3.77	Usually used	1.023
	%	3.2	7.3	25.7	37.4	26.5			
33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	Count	22	44	193	244	222	3.83	Usually used	1.030
	%	3.0	6.1	26.6	33.7	30.6			
34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	Count	23	119	300	190	93	3.29	Sometimes used	.991
	%	3.2	16.4	41.4	26.2	12.8			
35. I look for people I can talk to in English.	Count	64	186	241	154	80	3.00	Sometimes used	1.125
	%	8.8	25.7	33.2	21.2	11.0			
36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	Count	50	150	266	172	87	3.13	Sometimes used	1.088
	%	6.9	20.7	36.7	23.7	12.0			
37. I think about my progress in learning English.	Count	21	93	261	234	116	3.46	Sometimes used	1.000
	%	2.9	12.8	36.0	32.3	16.0			
38. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	Count	27	114	262	220	102	3.35	Sometimes used	1.024
	%	3.7	15.7	36.1	30.3	14.1			

Note: ANT: Never or almost never true of me; UNT: Usually not true of me; SWT: Somewhat true of me; UTS: Usually true of me; AAT: Always or almost always true of me; S.D: Std. Deviation

As for metacognitive strategies, the students, in this research, showed strong desire to find out "how to become a better English learner" (M = 3.83, SD = 1.030). That is also the motivation to help them "pay attention when someone is speaking English." (M = 3.77, SD = 1.023). The results also indicated that the research students were aware of their mistakes and knew how to "use that information to help me do better" (M = 3.46, SD = 1.019). With "a clear goal for improving English skills" (M = 3.35, SD = 1.024), the participants "plan my schedule to have enough time to study English" (M = 3.29, SD = 0.991) by "looking for opportunities to read as much as possible in English" (M = 3.13, SD = 1.088) and "looking for people to talk English with" (M = 3.00, SD = 1.125). Generally, it can be seen from Table 11 that metacognitive strategies were in medium-high use among the participants with the mean score over 3.00.

Affective strategy

Affective strategies are learning strategies concerning lowering anxiety (item 39), encouraging themselves (item 40, 41) and managing emotions (items 42, 43, 44) while learning English. Similar to cognitive strategies, the category of affective strategies was reported to be moderately used among the NLU-HCM students. As seen in Table 6, over 80% of the surveyed students knew how to relax whenever they felt intimidated by using English (item 39). In addition, a large number of the participants, 587 out of 725 students, reported that they noticed their tenseness when studying and using English (item 42). However, a majority of the participants were able to manage their emotions and encourage themselves to speak English although they were afraid of making mistakes. The findings also revealed that nearly half of the participants (43.3%) rarely wrote down their feelings in a language learning diary. It can be seen from this that these NLU-HCM students preferred practicing English in spoken form to that in writing despite the fact that writing is a crucial skill in improving their English language competence.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of affective strategy

Statements		ANT	UNT	SWT	UTS	AAT	Mean	Frequency of the use of strategy	S.D
39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	Count	38	92	236	241	118	3.43	Sometimes used	1.068
	%	5.2	12.7	32.6	33.2	16.3			
40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	Count	43	96	252	229	105	3.35	Sometimes used	1.068
	%	5.9	13.2	34.8	31.6	14.5			
41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	Count	88	174	215	158	90	2.98	Sometimes used	1.201
	%	12.1	24.0	29.7	21.8	12.4			
42. I notice if I am tense when I am studying or using English.	Count	52	86	244	227	116	3.37	Sometimes used	1.106
	%	7.2	11.9	33.7	31.3	16.0			
43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	Count	116	198	217	128	66	2.77	Sometimes used	1.184
	%	16.0	27.3	29.9	17.7	9.1			
44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	Count	85	171	246	149	74	2.94	Sometimes used	1.147
	%	11.7	23.6	33.9	20.6	10.2			

Note: ANT: Never or almost never true of me; UNT: Usually not true of me; SWT: Somewhat true of me; UTS: Usually true of me; AAT: Always or almost always true of me; S.D: Std. Deviation

None of the affective strategies has a mean score higher than 3.50. The findings in Table 6 shows that affective strategies were used in the study at a medium level with the mean scores of each strategy item ranging from 2.77 to 3.46. Among affective strategies, three of them were least employed by the students, namely "writing down my feelings in a language learning diary" (M = 2.77, SD = 1.184); "talking to someone else about the feeling of learning English' (M = 2.94, SD = 1.147) and "giving myself a reward or treat when doing well in English" (M = 2.98, SD = 1.201). The low usage frequency of the items in this group may be due to Vietnamese culture where most students are quite shy to express their feelings in public. In fact, such strategies should be introduced to students to help them feel relaxed and less pressured when communicating in English.

Social strategy

Table 7 shows that the participant NLU-HCM students moderately used social strategy in their learning English. Among the three sets of social strategies: asking questions (items 45, 46, 48 and 49); cooperating with others (item 47); and empathizing with others (item 50), the most frequently used one was asking questions; and requesting others to slow down or repeat whenever they couldn't catch up with what was said. However, over 50% of the surveyed students revealed that they didn't ask native speakers to correct them or ask them for help. This may be because Vietnamese students in general and NLU-HCM students in particular have limited chances to communicate with native speakers; and as a result, they learn English with insufficient exposure to English speaking environment in spite of the high percentage of students who (496 participants, accounting for 68,5%) agreed that they tried to learn the culture of English speakers, maybe through other sources like books, films or the Internet.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of social strategy

Statements		ANT	UNT	SWT	UTS	AAT	Mean	Frequency of the use of strategy	S.D
45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	Count	34	90	220	238	143	3.50	Usually used	1.084
	%	4.7	12.4	30.3	32.8	19.7			
46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	Count	195	207	151	115	57	2.49	Sometimes used	1.257
	%	26.9	28.6	20.8	15.9	7.9			
47. I practice English with other students.	Count	102	215	228	129	51	2.74	Sometimes used	1.119
	%	14.1	29.7	31.4	17.8	7.0			
48. I ask for help from English speakers.	Count	181	212	169	106	57	2.51	Sometimes used	1.231
	%	25.0	29.2	23.3	14.6	7.9			
49. I ask questions in English.	Count	95	193	225	156	56	2.84	Sometimes used	1.136
	%	13.1	26.6	31.0	21.5	7.7			
50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	Count	74	155	255	152	89	3.04	Sometimes used	1.150
	%	10.2	21.4	35.2	21.0	12.3			

Note: ANT: Never or almost never true of me; UNT: Usually not true of me; SWT: Somewhat true of me; UTS: Usually true of me; AAT: Always or almost always true of me; S.D: Std. Deviation

The frequency of using social strategies among the research participants is not high, as seen in Table 7. The most popular social strategy employed by the students at NLU-HCM was "asking the other person to slow down or say it again when not understanding something in English" (M = 3.5, SD = 1.084), followed by "trying to learn about the culture of English speakers" (M = 3.04, SD = 1.150). This finding proved that the participants were aware of the importance of culture in English learning. In fact, it is noteworthy to point out that "language and culture are not separate but acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other" (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). However, looking at Table 13, we can observe that social strategies were not the ones that were usually used by the participants; especially the strategies of asking for help (M = 2.51, SD = 1.231), asking for correction (M = 2.49, SD = 1.257), and asking question (M = 2.84, SD = 1.136). Such findings were consistent with those of the previous research carried out by Sindhu Harish among India's undergraduate students in one university in Kerala State. Harish's study revealed that the students did not use any of the social strategies with high frequencies and among the 6 items of social strategies, *asking questions in English* was reported as being used least. This may be true in Asian learning contexts where students feel too shy to have social interaction with others or raise questions to avoid losing face because of their mistakes. Hence, to enhance students' confidence in using English in communication, ESP lecturers should introduce such strategies to their students.

Frequency of overall six categories of strategy use

As shown in Table 8 regarding the frequency of overall six categories, it can be seen that the overall mean scores range from 2.85 to 3.39. It means that the students at NLU-HCM generally applied six strategy categories to their English learning at a moderate level. Among the 6 learning strategies, the research participants most frequently used metacognitive (M = 3.19, SD = .78) with nearly 50% (n = 344) of the students using this strategy with a high frequency range, 47,4 % (n = 311) with medium range and only 9.7% (n = 70) with low range.

The second most preferred strategy (M = 3.38) was the one named "memory" with approximately 43% (n = 311) employing it with high frequency, and 48.4% (n = 351) considered themselves as being moderate users of memory strategy whereas just 8.7% (n = 63) reported a low level of use for this strategy.

Affective strategies came in the third rank in terms of frequency (M = 3.19). Over thirty-four percent of the research students (n = 249) reported a high frequency use for this strategy, 50.5% (n = 366) claimed that they used it in a moderate way while nearly 15% (n = 108) said that they rarely used affective strategies for their English learning. Cognitive strategies followed the affective strategies regarding the usage frequency (M = 3.18). Nearly thirty-five percent of the students implied that they frequently used cognitive strategies; 51.7% (n = 375) fell in the medium usage category and almost 14% reported to be low users.

Table 8. Frequency of learning strategy use by students

	Mean	**Standard Deviation**	**Frequency of learning strategy use by students**					
			Low		Medium		High	
			Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Memory	3.38	.72	63	8.7	351	48.4	311	42.9
Cognitive	3.18	.74	101	13.9	375	51.7	249	34.3
Compensation	3.06	.78	145	20.0	353	48.7	227	31.3
Metacognitive	3.39	.78	70	9.7	311	42.9	344	47.4
Affective	3.19	.80	108	14.9	366	50.5	251	34.6
Social	2.85	.88	241	33.2	305	42.1	179	24.7

The findings of the study indicated that compensation strategies were ranked fifth in the list. The percentage of students who always employed compensation strategies in their learning reached 34.2% (n = 227) while 48.7% (n = 353) used it moderately and 20% (n = 145) rarely applied this kind of strategy to their learning.

Social strategies were the least frequently used among the six learning strategies (M = 2.85). 179 out of 725 research respondents (equivalent to 24.7%) rated themselves as frequent users of social strategies whereas this kind of strategies were moderately used by 42.1% and never or almost never by 33.2% of the students.

4.2. Discussion

Based on Oxford's (1990) interpretation scale concerning the degree of strategy use, all of the strategies employed by research students fell in the medium use range. Among the six categories of language learning strategies, metacognitive strategies were reported to be the most preferred categories. This result was similar to that of Christine Foong & Goh (1997) in which Chinese students reported using metacognitive strategies more frequently than all the other types of strategies. According to Ajideh (2009), metacognitive strategies and autonomous learning are essential for both learning and teaching ESP since they regulate and manage learning. The results may infer that the students at NLU-HCM were aware of their English mistakes and used that knowledge to help them improve by paying attention when someone was speaking English, finding out how to become better learners of English, setting up their learning goals, planning their learning schedule, and thinking about their progress. Thus, such metacognitive strategies generally helped improve their language proficiency.

Memory strategies were rated as the second most favored ones. Since English learning curriculum and testing in Vietnam focus on grammar and vocabulary more than communication, Vietnamese learners are encouraged to memorize and repeat grammatical rules and the meaning of new words to demonstrate their understanding. Gradually they habitually applied this kind of strategy to doing exercises and taking the exams.

The findings of the study indicated that the mean scores of affective (M = 3.19) and cognitive (M = 3.18) strategies were almost equal. Both learning strategies were considered useful tools for the process of learning languages. If cognitive strategies involve practicing language skills, affective strategies help learners to feel relaxed so that they can learn language more effectively. Especially in the Vietnamese language learning context, students might be too shy to present their own opinion in public. Hence, ESP teachers should encourage their students to overcome their anxiety to practice English as much as possible.

According to the obtained descriptive statistics results, it can be seen that compensation and social strategies were not the ones that were often used among the research participants. The low- medium usage frequency of compensation strategies may lead to the difficulties in handling language problems among NLU-HCM students when they face some challenges in learning language since this kind of strategies could be helpful in surmounting L2 learning difficulties. According to Oxford's (1990) learning strategy taxonomy, while compensation strategies are very useful tools to overcome language barriers by using gestures, asking someone for help, or even concentrating on what others are saying, social strategies facilitate oral communication through interaction with others. However, the research students did not prefer applying social strategies to their learning languages as it came last in their ranking. This might be due to the fact that the students at NLU-HCM had very few opportunities to be exposed to authentic English communicative situations, like practicing English or communicating with native speakers of English. Thus, ESP lecturers should provide more opportunities for their students to utilize social strategies in their language learning in real contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings from the study, it can be concluded that the surveyed NLU-HCM students were moderate users of language learning strategies. They didn't completely use all 6 strategies in their learning, which probably prevented their progress of language learning. As stated in the studies applying the SILL (Balci, 2017; Hajar, 2019; Jalal & Kaveh, 2016; Kunasaraphan, 2015; Seng & Khleang, 2014), using language learning strategies would have valuable influence on language proficiency. In other words, it is obvious that there are significant relationships between language learning strategies and language proficiency. In fact, the six language learning strategies are linked to and support one another in the learning process. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers of English at a tertiary level should take advantage of all six learning strategies when organizing classroom activities. To optimize learning outcomes, ESP lecturers should provide learning activities corresponding to their students' favored learning strategies and at the same time promote the use of other strategies among their students to help improve students' language proficiency.

Limitation and recommendations for further research

The current research study was conducted on the use of language learning strategies among 725 students at NLU-HCM and employed numerical data collected with the convenient technique. Thus, future research studies may explore more on the topic, such as the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and academic achievement, with a larger number of samples, in a systematic, in-depth manner or combining several data collecting methods to find out the importance of applying learning strategies to language proficiency.

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