Language learning strategies among Vietnamese EFL High School students

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Abstract

Despite productive research on language learning strategies (LLS), LLS is still a multifaceted topic subject to controversy. Thus, previous researchers have encouraged conducting further LLS research in different educational contexts and student population. The current study was conducted to examine the LLS use among high school students, a relatively neglected population in previous LLS studies. Participants in the study were 83 Vietnamese tenth-graders who were administered the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990), including six subscales: memory-related, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The results suggested that high school learners utilized a wide range of language learning strategies at a medium level of frequency, indicating a necessity for more explicit LLS instruction. While metacognitive strategies were reported as the most frequently utilized strategies, affective strategies were the least. Cognitive strategies, which were strongly related to other LLS groups, tended to play the central role in the language learners' LLS employment. Gender was confirmed to be a significant factor that influenced the students' LLS usage only in the case of social strategies. Pedagogical implications regarding strategy instruction were discussed.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, high school, Vietnam

Introduction

Language learning strategy (LLS) has been long examined as a research topic, starting as early as the 1970s (Bialystok, 1979; Dulay & Burt, 1972; Taylor, 1975). The significance of strategic learning has been prevalently emphasized in previous research. However, vigorous debate regarding the employment of LLS and its effectiveness continues in recent years with encouragement for conducting LLS research in various educational contexts (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014).

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LLS employment plays a crucial role in helping EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners regulate their language learning process and has been consistently found to be related to linguistic achievements. For example, Green and Oxford (1995) carried out a study investigating the language learning strategies of 374 college students. They found that the frequency of students' LLS use was substantially linked to their language proficiency, suggesting an ascending spiral relation between the two.

Gender was also found to be a factor that influences the LLS usage. Griffiths (2003) utilized the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990), to examine the LLS use of 348 students from 21 different countries. The study findings indicated that advanced language learners applied LLS more frequently, and at more sophisticated level compared to lower-ability learners.

LLS is a multi-faceted construct and may be moderated by various factors such as "situation, context, sample and individual styles" (Griffiths, 2003, p. 371). Indeed, arguments about language learning strategy might include its definitions, relation to linguistic achievements, classifications, contextual dependence, whether it is teachable, and what research methods and analysis are appropriate in LLS studies (see Griffiths & Oxford, 2014 for a detailed review). For example, a meta-analysis by Plonsky (2011) examined the effect of learning strategy instructions on learners' achievement. He reviewed 61 empirical studies, and the findings suggested a small to medium effect of strategy instruction on learners' linguistic performance. This means language learning strategies are teachable and can positively influence the language learners' linguistic performance. In his study, the number of language learning strategies use, the learning context and the length of strategy employment, were also confirmed as significant factors that moderated the effectiveness of strategy instruction.

Given the complex nature of language learning strategies, the results of LLS research in a certain educational situation or country may not be applicable to other contexts. More research is warranted to shed light on the LLS practice of EFL learners in different socio-educational settings. Furthermore, a perusal of previous literature also reveals that relatively few studies examined LLS use of high school learners (Zhou, 2010). Regarding the Vietnamese EFL context, there have been surprisingly few studies inspecting the use of language learning strategies (Nguyen, 2013), particularly in the case of high school students. The current study was conducted in response to further provide insights into high school students' LLS practice and whether gender plays a role in determining how those students used LLS.

The present study aims to address the following research questions:

    (1) What are the language learning strategies employed by Vietnamese high school students?

    (2) Is there any significant difference in language strategy use between male and female high school learners?

A review on Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

Researchers have various ways of conceptualizing the construct language learning strategies. For instance, Wenden and Rubin (1987) conceptualized language learning strategies as sets of language learners' activities aiming to enhance the process of obtaining, storing, retrieving and using the linguistic information. A popular definition of the term was provided by Oxford (1990). She defined language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Cohen (1990) explained the term in light of the conscious effort of language learners to improve their language proficiency through memory and application of the target language features. Likewise, Griffiths (2008) also considered LLS as conscious actions taken by the language learners to self-regulate their own language learning process. In short, despite a variety of LLS definitions provided in previous studies, researchers tend to agree upon the fact that language learning strategies are the results of a conscious attempt of language learners and they are present throughout the language learning process dealing with both the linguistic input and output.

Categorization of Language Learning Srategy

As informed in the literature review by Griffiths and Oxford (2014), LLS classification is also a controversial topic. Language learning strategies have been categorized into different groups. O'Malley et al (1985) divided language learning strategies into three main categories: metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning, monitoring and evaluating learning activities), cognitive strategies (e.g., directly dealing with linguistic information such as memorizing and practicing it) and socioaffective strategies (e.g., interacting with others). Rubin (1987) also classified LLS into three major groups: learning-oriented, communication-oriented and social-oriented activities. The first group, i.e., learning-oriented strategies, was again divided into two sub-groups, cognitive and metacognitive strategies whose usage purposes are identical with Oxford's (1990) cognitive and metacognitive LLS as described in the following section.

The most popular and inclusive LLS categorization belongs to Oxford (1990). She categorized LLS into two major groups, i.e., direct and indirect learning strategies from which six subcategories stemmed. The group of direct strategies included cognitive, metacognitive and memory-related strategies. Cognitive strategies dealt with language information in a direct way, e.g., note-taking, analyzing, summarizing, synthesizing and practicing activities. Metacognitive strategies dealt with the overall process of language learning, including planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning activities and learning process in general. Memory-related strategies as its name indicates were involved with storing and retrieving linguistic information, which does not always entail deep comprehension (Oxford, 2003). This suggests that the quantity of LLS usage may not necessarily translate into the quality of LLS employment.

The second major LLS group comprises compensatory, affective and social strategies. These strategies were considered indirect strategies as they provide support for the learning process in an indirect manner (Oxford, 1990). Compensatory strategies were those activities that language learning use to make up for their missing knowledge, which could include guessing the meaning of new words based on contextual cues, using body language, and making up for unknown words by speaking/writing the other way around. Affective strategies were associated with emotions and feelings, which were utilized to self-motivate or to reduce the learners' anxiety. Finally, social strategies were related to interactions with others, helping the language learners to clarify information, to practice the target language and to learn more about new cultural values (Oxford, 1990).

LLS research in Vietnam

Despite the significance of language learning strategy in language education, few LLS studies have been conducted in the Vietnamese EFL context. Oanh and Hien (2006) explored the EFL teachers' and students' perception of memorization strategies in a Vietnamese university. Seventy-eight participants were recruited for the study. They were distributed self-developed questionnaire by the researchers and then interviewed for further insights into their beliefs about memorization strategies. The results demonstrated that participants differentiated between two types of memorization, one associated with deep learning and the other with shallow learning. While participants believed the former to be beneficial to their language learning process, the latter was not.

Nguyen (2013) carried out a large-scale research to examine Vietnamese tertiary students' LLS deployment. A total number of 564 participants, both English- and non-English major students, were recruited for the study purposes. A self-developed questionnaire was developed by the

researcher, inquiring about students' strategies for learning four language skills, i.e., speaking, listening, reading and writing. The findings indicated a significant relation between the frequency of LLS use and participants' self-rated language abilities for all four skills. Students who majored in English had a significantly higher level of LLS employment compared to their non-English major counterparts.

The impact of metacognitive strategies on learners' reading comprehension ability was examined in Do and Nguyen's study (2014). Sixty-four college students were randomly split into two groups, i.e., treatment and control group. While treatment groups received metacognitive instruction in their reading class, the control group did not. Participants were administered reading pre and posttest as well as researcher's self-developed metacognitive reading strategies. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group in regard to the posttest reading achievement and in the level of awareness in employing metacognitive strategies.

Nguyen (2016) employed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990) to examine the LLS use of 140 English-major and non-English major students. The findings showed that metacognitive strategies were most frequently employed, whereas compensation strategies were the least applied strategies. A significant difference was also found between the two groups of participants, English versus non-English major groups.

In summary, previous studies addressing EFL learners' employment of language learning strategies in Vietnam is still limited and primarily employ self-developed questionnaires. Further research is necessitated to provide more insights into the LLS employment among high school EFL learners, especially in Vietnam, in order to inform relevant stakeholders.

Research Methodology

Participants in this study were 83 tenth-grade students (27 males), aged 16 years old, at a high school in Vietnam. They have studied English as a foreign language for seven years. The majority of participants had no formal training in language learning strategies. Their English level was at A1 level, i.e., the first level according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The test participants took was a commercial Cambridge placement test that was published in the Cambridge English Prepare book series.

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990) was employed to collect data for the study. The questionnaire

includes 50 five-point Likert scale items, ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me). There are six components in the SILL survey, which are equivalent to six LLS subcategories: Part A - Memory strategies (9 items); Part B - Cognitive strategies (14 items); Part C - Compensatory strategies (6 items); Part D - Metacognitive strategies (9 items); Part E - Affective strategies (6 items); and Part F - Social strategies (6 items).

To ensure the high school students could understand the survey items with ease, the survey was translated into Vietnamese. Two translators, who hold Bachelor of Arts degree in English language first individually translated the SILL into Vietnamese. They then discussed together the differences in their translation and decided upon the final version of the Vietnamese SILL.

The Vietnamese SILL was then created online using Google Forms before being administered to the participants. Cronbach's Alpha reliability of the Vietnamese SILL was at 0.95, suggesting a high internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire employed in this study.

After the SILL questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese and made available online via Google Forms, it was administered to the study participants. They were allowed a week to access and complete the online SILL survey anonymously in order to extract sincere responses from the participants and avoid intimidating them in any way as participants may be nervous if they have to fill in their names.

SPSS software version 22 was used to analyze the collected data. Descriptive and inferential statistics were performed to address the study questions. Composite scores were also calculated for six components of the SILL by averaging the scores of its individual items. Descriptive statistics were run to provide general information about the participants' LLS deployment. Next, bivariate correlation was applied to investigate the correlations between six LLS components. Finally, to determine whether there is a significant difference in LLS employment between male and female students, independent t-test analysis was utilized.

Findings and Analysis

Language Learning Strategies of Vietnamese High School Students

The usage level of language learning strategies is divided into three levels based on the mean values: 1 - 2.4 (low), 2.5 - 3.4 (medium) and 3.5 - 5 (high) (Ali & Paramasivam, 2016; Oxford, 1990). Table 1 presents the general descriptive statistics for six major LLS categories.

Table 1
Summary for Descriptive Statistics for Six LLS Subcategories

Strategies	M	SD	Level
META	3.23	0.85	Medium
SOC	3.10	0.85	Medium
COG	3.02	0.65	Medium
MEM	2.96	0.73	Medium
COM	2.92	0.73	Medium
AFF	2.82	0.72	Medium

Note. M = Mean, SD = standard deviation, MEM = memory strategies, COG = cognitive strategies, COM = compensatory strategies, META = metacognitive strategies, AFF = affective strategies, and SOC = social strategies

Table 2
Correlations Among Six SILL Subcategories

	MEM	COG	COM	META	AFF	SOC
MEM	-					
COG	.67	-				
COM	.43	.58	-			
META	.53	.66	.51	-		
AFF	.48	.52	.41	.59	-	
SOC	.59	.62	.41	.73	.53	-

Note. MEM = memory-related strategies, COG = cognitive strategies, COM = compensatory strategies, META = metacognitive strategies, AFF = affective strategies, and SOC = social strategies
**Correlations reported in Table 2 are all significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

It is demonstrated from Table 1 that Vietnamese high school students employed language learning strategies at a medium level. The order of LLS preference of the participants based on mean values is metacognitive strategies (M = 3.23, SD = 0.85), social strategies (M = 3.10, SD = 0.85), cognitive strategies (M = 3.02, SD = 0.65), memory-related strategies (M = 2.96, SD = 0.73), compensatory strategies (M = 2.92, SD = 0.73) and affective strategies (M = 2.82, SD = 0.72). This finding is resonant with the study result reported by Ho and Ng (2016). They distributed the SILL questionnaire by Oxford (1990) to 1708 Malaysian students. The results indicated that metacognitive strategies were most frequently employed and affective strategies the least. Given the role of LLS employment in language learning, explicit strategy instructions may be necessary to guide EFL

learners the techniques/strategies to be active in their learning process. For example, metacognitive strategies should be instructed to EFL learners for them to be able to manage, monitor and evaluate their own learning process, thus leading to more autonomous learning. Socio-affective strategies play a vital role in enhancing students' learning persistence, maintaining a continuous effort during their learning process (Zheng, Liang, Li & Tsai, 2018).

In the next section, correlations among SILL subscales will be examined. Table 2 displays the results of bivariate correlation analysis for the six subscales of the LLS questionnaire.

All the subscales of SILL correlated at a medium to high level, and the strongest relationship was found between social strategies and metacognitive strategies, r (81) = 0.73, p < 0.01. The weakest relations were found between affective strategies and compensatory strategies, r (81) = .41, p < 0.01 as well as between social cognitive strategies and compensatory strategies, r (81) = .41, p < 0.01. High correlations among the SILL subscales may suggest a close relationship among different groups of LLS. This finding also bears significant implications for strategy instruction. First, as indicated in Table 2, the cognitive strategy group stands out to be central to the LLS employment of the participants. It correlates most strongly with memory-related, metacognitive and social strategies (r > .60). As discussed in the literature review, cognitive strategy category consists of mainly LLS for directly practicing language skills such watch, read, write and speak in English, which indicates the crucial role of practice in language education. Students who practice English skills more, i.e., employing more cognitive strategies, tend to utilize more frequently many other strategies as well. This means besides explicit strategy instruction, language instructors should allow EFL learners more opportunities to practice the target language. Indeed, Nishino (2007) pointed out that EFL learners could acquire more reading strategies through free reading practice on their own.

To provide further insights into details of the LLS behaviors among the high school students, descriptive statistics for individual LLS items are presented in Appendix 1.

The participants, as indicated in Table 3, employed a variety of LLS, most of which were utilized at a medium level. Regarding memory-related strategies, the high school students generally preferred to learn new vocabulary by relating them to photos/locations as well as revising their lessons. Three mostly used LLS cognitive strategies are watching videos/movies in English, using new words in different ways and practicing English pronunciation. Regarding compensatory strategies, using body language to express meaning, guessing the intention of interlocutors and using synonyms were the most featured language learning strategies. In

regard to metacognitive strategies, paying attention to other people when they speak English, trying to figure out better ways to learn English and learning from mistakes were the three most reported strategies. The participants also exercised affective strategies such as self-encouraging and monitoring their anxiety when learning/practicing the target language. Finally, when it comes to social strategies, talking to others and asking questions in English were reported as the tenth-graders' most common activities. Although the participants utilized a variety of learning strategies, they only exploited them to a medium level, suggesting a need for strategy instruction in formal English classrooms. This is to ensure that learners have knowledge of available LLS and also to instruct them to be able to apply LLS effectively.

Four least used language learning strategies (ranked at a low level) were: "I use flashcards to remember new English words"; "I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English"; "I read for pleasure in English"; and "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary". This finding suggests that the EFL high school students rarely practice free pleasure English-learning activities such as pleasure reading and writing, which can be ascribed heavily exam-oriented English education in Vietnam. Language learners are oftentimes overloaded with vocabulary and grammar assignments. This can be a drawback to the English learning of Vietnamese EFL learners as free reading experience is powerful in regard to developing lexical size, reading comprehension, background knowledge, spelling and writing skills (Krashen, 2004; Lee, 2005; Lee, 2007; Stanovich, Cunningham & West, 1998).

On the whole, Vietnamese high school students utilize a wide range of LLS activities, mostly at a moderate frequency level. Despite the well-proven benefits of free reading and writing activities, pleasure reading and writing were not reported as common LLSs among the study participants.

Gender difference in LLS

Gender has been found as a factor that can influence language learners' deployment of LLS (Green & Oxford, 1995; Goh & Foong, 1997; Khamkhien, 2010). Another purpose of the current study is to investigate whether gender has a significant effect on the LLS use among high school students. Table 4 presents the t-test analysis results comparing the LLS utilization between male and female tenth-graders.

Table 4
Summary of independent T-test results regarding gender effect on LLS usage

Strategies	Male		Female		
	M	SD	M	SD	t
MEM	2.84	.97	3.01	.59	-0.82
COG	2.89	.75	3.01	.60	-1.31
COM	2.91	.69	2.93	.76	-0.10
META	2.97	0.81	3.36	0.84	-2.00
AFF	2.71	0.70	2.88	0.73	-1.03
SOC	2.81	0.88	3.25	0.80	-2.26*

Note. MEM = memory-related strategies, COG = cognitive strategies, COM = compensatory strategies, META = metacognitive strategies, AFF = affective strategies, SOC = social strategies
* p < 0.05

A comparison of LLS use between male and female high school students is reported in Table 4. Specifically, girls scored higher than boys in regard to LSS mean of all six groups of LLS. However, only the difference in social strategies reached statistical significance, t (81) = -2.26, p < 0.05. This result suggests that during their language learning process, female students tend to interact with other people more, e.g., to practice the target language and learn more about cultural knowledge, compared to high school male students. This finding is, nonetheless, not in line with Ho and NG (2016) who reported a nonsignificant gender effect on social strategy use. Overall, female high school students tend to employ LLS more frequently than boys (Green & Oxford, 1995), particularly in the use of social strategies.

Conclusion

The research was conducted to examine the LLS employed by Vietnamese high school students. The findings indicated that the participants utilized a wide range of LLS activities at a medium frequency level. It was also found that free reading and writing activities were not commonly used strategies among high school students although free reading and writing have long been promoted as powerful approaches to enhance linguistic abilities. Consistent with previous research, gender effect on the frequency of LLS deployment was also confirmed in this study favoring female students, particularly in the group of social strategies.

This research is not without limitations. Due to the limited number of participants, caution should be exercised in generalizing the study results. Qualitative methods, for example, interview, could have also been utilized to provide further insights into the LLS practice of the participants. However, provided that little research has done in examining LLS practice of Vietnamese EFL learners, the current research contributed to the research on LLS in Vietnam and also in the Asian language-learning context.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix 1
Summary of Descriptive Statistics or Individual SILL Items

Strategies	Items	Means	SD	Level
Memory-related Strategies (MEM)	MEM3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help remember the word.	3.25	1.12	M
	MEM9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	3.23	1.24	M
	MEM8. I review English lessons often.	3.14	1.12	M
	MEM1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	3.05	1.06	M
	MEM4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	2.98	1.15	M
	MEM5. I use rhymes to remember new English words	2.98	1.18	M
	MEM7. I physically act out new English words.	2.89	1.19	M
	MEM2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them	2.64	1.04	M
	MEM6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.	2.45	1.26	L
Cognitive strategies (COG)	COG15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	3.52	1.23	**H**
	COG13. I use the English words I know in different ways.	3.48	1.04	M
	COG12. I practice the sounds of English.	3.42	1.13	M
	COG18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	3.39	1.20	M
	COG10. I say or write new English words several times.	3.36	1.19	M
	COG11. I try to talk like native English speakers.	3.16	1.09	M
	COG22. I try not to translate word-for-word.	3.10	1.14	M
	COG19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	2.99	1.13	M
	COG23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	2.93	1.08	M
	COG20. I try to find patterns in English.	2.87	1.12	M

	COG14. I start conversations in English.	2.61	0.94	M
	COG21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	2.57	1.13	M
	COG17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	2.48	1.00	L
	COG16. I read for pleasure in English.	2.46	1.15	L
Compensatory strategies (COM)	COM25. When I can' t think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	3.31	1.22	M
	COM28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	3.08	1.14	M
	COM29. If I can' t think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	3.06	1.15	M
	COM24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	2.99	1.13	M
	COM26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	2.60	1.15	M
	COM27. I read English without looking up every new word.	2.51	0.98	M
Metacognitive strategies (META)	META32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	3.61	1.14	**H**
	META33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	3.60	1.26	**H**
	META31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	3.43	1.14	M
	META36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	3.23	1.11	M
	META35. I look for people I can talk to in English.	3.10	1.14	M
	META37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	3.10	1.04	M
	META34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	3.06	1.00	M
	META38. I think about my progress in learning English.	3.06	1.12	M
	META30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	2.87	1.15	M
Affective strategies (AFF)	AFF40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	3.12	0.96	M
	AFF41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	3.01	1.13	M
	AFF42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	3.01	1.09	M
	AFF39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	2.93	0.97	M

	AFF44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	2.75	1.28	M
	AFF43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	2.14	1.08	L
Social strategies (SOC)	SOC45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	3.47	1.09	M
	SOC47. I practice English with other students.	3.31	1.15	M
	SOC49. I ask questions in English.	3.01	1.09	M
	SOC46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	2.98	1.18	M
	SOC50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	2.96	1.16	M
	SOC48. I ask for help from English speakers.	2.89	1.15	M