Learning Strategies of Two Thai Undergraduate Students

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Language learning strategies are important for students to help develop their language competences and succeed academically. This paper is aimed to identify the learning strategies used by two Thai university students taking English language training program. The two female students speak Thai language as their mother tongue, Bahasa Indonesia and English as their second/foreign languages. Data were collected from interviews, observations, and documents. Results of this study reveal that those two Thai students employ two learning strategies—compensation strategies (getting help, using mime or gesture, avoiding communication partially or totally, and selecting topic) and metacognitive strategies (overviewing and linking with already known materials, identifying the purpose of a language task, seeking practice opportunities, and self-evaluating). Several emergent findings are paying attention to classmates and memorizing strategy. Difficulties in finding speaking partners as well as the feeling of reserved and shy are indicated as speaking problems. To help them with such problems, Google Translate is also perceived as beneficial to translate unknown words and expressions.

Keywords: learning strategies, EFL students, qualitative inquiries

Strategi pembelajaran Bahasa penting bagi siswa untuk membantu mereka mengembangkan kemampuan berbahasa dan keberhasilan akademik mereka. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi strategi belajar dua mahasiswa dari Thailand yang belajar di sebuah program sarjana jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris. Dua mahasiswa perempuan tersebut berbicara Bahasa Thai sebagai Bahasa ibu mereka, Bahasa Indonesia dan Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa asing. Data dikumpulkan dari interview, observasi, dan dokumen, hasil penelitian ini menemukan bahwa dua mahasiswa Thai tersebut menggunakan dua strategi belajar yakni strategi kompensasi (mencari bantuan, menggunakan isyarat, menghindari komunikasi secara sebagian ataupun total, dan memilih topik) serta strategi metakognitif (menghubungkan dengan materi yang sudah dikenal sebelumnya, mengidentifikasi tujuan penugasan Bahasa, mencari kesempatan

untuk praktek, dan evaluasi diri). Beberapa temuan lain adalah memperhatikan teman sekelas dan strategi menghafal. Kesulitan-kesulitan dalam menemukan teman berbicara dan perasaan malu diindikasikan sebagai masalah dalam berbicara. Untuk membantu mengatasinya, mereka menggunakan Google Translate untuk menterjemahkan kata-kata dan ekspresi-ekspresi yang tidak mereka ketahui artinya.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies are crucial as they serve as the tools for developing communicative competence and better self-confidence (Oxford, 1990). To dates, studies on language learning strategies have been conducted using the instruments developed by Oxford which is called Survey Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) with varied results. Some other studies were conducted applying the qualitative inquiries which reveal interesting findings. A qualitative inquiry study finds that high proficient students use relatively balanced learning strategies compared to the low proficient students (Sofyan, Fajrina, & Hanifa, 2015). Another similar study using the Survey Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) also finds that successful learners tend to use wider range of learning strategies (with metacognitive strategies as the most frequently used) compared to the unsuccessful ones (with surface level cognitive strategies) (Gerami & Baighlou, 2011). It has also been proven that appropriate use of language learning strategies to generate appropriate behaviors can lead to language skill proficiency (Oxford, 2002). However, O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, & Russo (1985) find that students simply use strategies for less complex tasks and that teachers are not aware of what strategies the students use. Worse, teachers do not introduce strategies when teaching. It can be inferred that successful learners are more aware of using language learning strategies thereby they use them more appropriately with more variation. On the contrary, less successful students are likely to use limited strategies or ineffective strategies. The fact that learning strategies are not introduced by teachers adds up to the list of teaching materials that should be taught to students. In relation to that, this study aims to identify the learning strategies used by two Thai students majoring in English language teaching in a teacher training program in Indonesia. Results of this study can be beneficial for the students to develop their learning strategies to help them better cope with academic lives and future profession. Information on what strategies are necessary to be taught is crucial to be included in the next learning processes to help learners become academically successful.

There have been many definitions of learning strategies. Learning strategy can be defined as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p.8). Meanwhile Griffiths (2003) defines learning strategies as "specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of learning language." This refers to the actions that learners do to communicate with others (p. 369). In other words, language learning strategies become parts of learners' strategies to cope with the difficulties and challenges in learning a target language. Such strategies are selected and applied to help learners direct their learning in such a way to achieve learning goals. In similar views, the operational definition for learning strategies in this study is

that learning strategies are learning-related actions employed by students to support their learning success. These actions serve as the strategies to facilitate, ease, and make learning more effective.

Based on the study on ESL learners, learning strategies can be divided into three categories (metacognitive, cognitive, and social mediating strategies) (O'Malley et al., 1985). In comparison, six sets of second language learning behaviors are proposed by Oxford (Oxford, 1990). The phenomenal classification of Oxford's learning strategies is the distinction of direct and indirect strategies in which the direct class consists of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies and the indirect class comprises metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Supporting Ellis's (1994) opinion that Oxford's classifications of language learning strategies may be the most comprehensive among other classifications. Therefore, Oxford's language learning strategies are widely referred in learning strategy research.

Studies on learning strategies have attracted attentions of scholars and practitioners as these concern students' language performance which can be measured in the forms of proficiency test, self-rating test, and a course grade (Oxford & Burry, 1993) as cited in (Oxford & Ehrman, 1995). In addition, results of many studies on language learning strategies show that successful learners use more than one strategies which is combined with their learning style and personality (Oxford, 1990). Interestingly, more recent studies indicate that students' use of language learning strategies is likely to be influenced and changed by environmental and contextual factors. Therefore, the dimension of language learning strategies become more complex and dynamic (Nguyen & Terry, 2017). With such proposition, more studies applying qualitative inquiries are deemed fruitful as it can dwell into aspects beyond the common constructs.

METHOD

Research Design

This study was designed as a descriptive qualitative study. Such a study is aimed to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics and makes attempts to answer the "what" question in a natural setting without intervention and manipulation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

Setting and Participants

The participants were two Thai students who took English Language Teacher Training Program in a private university in Indonesia. Their mother tongue is Thai, they speak little Malay language (this language is well understood by Indonesian people) in their families, and English is their foreign language. Prior to their study in Indonesia, they had a training on how to speak Bahasa Indonesia for a few weeks. With such circumstances, the students had two challenges—to communicate with their classmates using Bahasa Indonesia and to communicate in classrooms using English as the language of instruction. This study focuses on investigating the students' learning strategies used in classrooms. The unique context of this research lies on the participants

who came from Thailand and learn to speak both Bahasa Indonesia (because they live in Indonesia) and English (as the language of instruction in classrooms).

Data Collection Method and Analysis

Data were collected from interviews, observations, and documents. Interviews were conducted with the participants while observations were conducted in classrooms. Documents, in addition, were collected from the researcher's notes and other learning documents. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and themes were generated and then categorized.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data, student A and B employ two learning strategies—compensation and metacognitive strategies. The compensation strategies that both students use include getting help, using mime or gesture, avoiding communication partially or totally, and selecting topic.

Getting help is a common learning strategy that many students use. The one that is usually asked for a help is the classmates or the person sitting next to him/her.

> "I ask my friend sitting next to me. The lecturer also repeats the question if I do not understand." (Student A)

> "I also use my dictionary if I find new vocabulary." (Student A)

> "I usually ask my friends…how to say it in English…" (Student B)

> "When my lecturer asks me, my friend also help me to explain…" (Student B)

Student B gets various help other than friends—her notes, mobile dictionary and Google Translate. She makes use of her notes as she forgets about something she is about to say. When she does not know an English word, she uses her mobile dictionary or Google Translate tool.

The strategy of getting help may indicate that the students understand their difficulties and that they make efforts to improve their learning. This self-encouragement shows that the students have the willingness to learn and to catch up with what they might not know. This willingness refers to the notions of motivation and confidence to be responsible for their choices (Littlewood, 1996). As is proven from the extract, both student A and B took several actions of asking peers, using dictionary, using online application Google Translate, and making notes. It is, therefore, expected that those students can overcome their difficulties and become more creative when other challenges are encountered during their learning.

Another strategy when students do not know an English word (e.g. description of food) is by using mime or gesture.

"I ask my friend. I move my hand… for example when I want to explain about food, I don't know the English word. If the shape is curly, I move my hand like this –making zig zag in circles." (Student B).

Gestures in language learning processes can be regarded as a medium of language development which aims to build the socio-cognitive elements of language development and convey meaning (Gullberg, de Bot, & Virginia, 2008). Besides, the number of gestures made by more proficient learners are proven to be less than those of the less proficient ones. Also, learners speaking second language tend to use more gestures than when speaking their first language (Stam, 2006). This theory fits with the research participants' use of gestures in that they tried to convey meaning by using movements of hands or fingers while communicating ideas. As they encounter difficulties in expressing a concept which consequently lead to fluency problems, they tried to continue communicating using gestures. This is also supported by Gullberg (1998) who emphasizes that gestures also function as a communication strategy when learners face grammatical problems or fluency problems.

Avoiding communication partially and totally seems to be a strategy when the students do not really know a term or feel desperate with what they do not know.

"When I find difficulties, I am scared if I couldn't say it… I just pause or use filler…" (Student A)

"…if I choose the difficult one, I am afraid of getting stuck in front of the class." (Student B).

Avoidance is one of communicative strategies as proposed by (Tarone, 1980). Learners use this strategy by avoiding topic or abandoning messages. This is salient in the interview extract that student A stops talking using filler and student B avoid using difficult term. In other words, it can be implied that those students applied an avoidance strategy to keep the communication going on because when they continue, they even become more afraid of failing the communication.

Meanwhile, the metacognitive strategies that they employ are overviewing and linking with already known materials, identifying the purpose of a language task, seeking practice opportunities, and self-evaluating.

Seeking practice opportunities is a good learning strategy that can indicate motivation to learn. Both student A and B use this strategy to practice speaking with their friends. Meanwhile, student B practice speaking alone in her room or with her siblings.

"I had a conversation with my friends…in pair…" (Student A)

"I speak to myself in English in my room when there is no one there." (Student B)

"I talk to my younger sibling because he/she speaks more fluently than me…" (Student B)

What the student participants did shows that they have the awareness of the importance of speaking practices for their language development. Their decision to take chances to practice speaking alone

or with peers reflects their autonomous actions. As Brown (2000) affirms that students awareness of their own learning processes may lead to appropriate actions which can be identified in the strategies they choose. More importantly, practicing speaking is a good way to get language fluency although such activities can be more effective when carried out in a series of planned practices with pre-designed objectives.

The metacognitive strategies that are used by student A are delaying speech production to focus on listening and organizing.

> "When answering questions, I really listen to understand the questions." (Student A)

In verbal communication, understanding of what is being conveyed by interlocuters is crucial to maintain the flow of a conversation. As in the verbal interaction student A is being questioned, she needs to really pay attention to the interlocuter to understand the question and then prepare to answer it. Rost (2013) postulates that in communication active listening serves as the tools to obtain information and the meaning. This active listening leads the listener to information interpretation and understanding. Further, four types of understanding are formed: acceptable understanding (satisfactory inferences for both speakers and listeners), targeted understanding (the speaker's intended meaning), non-understanding (failure of inference making), and misunderstanding (conflicts of meaning between the speakers and listeners). In short, it can be implied that students use strategies to focus on listening to an interlocuter to obtain meanings and make the appropriate inferences which are used to respond to questions.

The compensation strategies that are only used by student B include switching to the mother tongue and coining words as can be seen in the following extract.

> "I try to answer questions using English but incomplete [sentences]… I speak English and Bahasa Indonesia…" (Student B)

Code-switching occurs due to the inability of a bilingual/multilingual speakers to produce a target language form. This code-switch strategy is commonly used by those at the early stage of language acquisition (Bullock & Toribio, 2009). In the interview extract, student B switch English and Bahasa Indonesia when trying to communicate about something. This is common as this strategy help the speakers to bridge the unknown words or phrases with their mother tongue to maintain the communication going.

Coining words, in which a student is connecting ideas and the word that represent them, can be seen in the following interview result:

> "I describe [something] a little bit, as far as I can, and my friend tell me the English term… I [try to describe] the color, the shop, and the taste…" (Student B)

Performance on language learning is perceived as successful when three elements are contained—complexity, accuracy, and fluency. While complexity refers to advanced language in use, accuracy is error-free production in written and spoken, and fluency concerns speech production with less

interruption (Skehan, 2009). In the case of student B, the strategy of producing utterances is by coining words by words with the help of a friend. This strategy can help the learner to communicate ideas but lack of fluency. This is due to the pause that the student needs to wait for her peer to inform some vocabularies that are used in speaking. Consequently, fluency becomes an issue, let alone the complexity and accuracy aspects. Although the context of this utterance is not for the sake of speaking performance, this can also be an indication of their speaking ability.

The metacognitive strategies—self-monitoring and setting goals and objectives—are also applied as proven in the following extract:

"I see my friends speak more fluently than me…" (Student B)

It is salient that student B is making comparison between herself and her peers. This can show a positive indication for improvement.

"I watch videos…so that I know the correct pronunciation… so that I can remember… the sentence structure." (Student B)

From the interview, students B sets up a short-term goal that is correct pronunciation and sentence structure by watching videos. This shows that the student understands what can be learned from watching videos. From watching videos, the student can learn the microskills of listening comprehension such as retaining chunks of language with different length, different expressions delivered in different grammatical forms, and recognize word classes, tenses, and other rules of sentence construction (Brown, 2001). Moreover, when such activities are regularly conducted, her language development can be accelerated.

Aside from the main findings, there are six issues that are revealed during the interviews. Student A uses strategy of paying attention to classmates, while student B uses memorizing strategies. paying attention is important in learning a language. (Oxford, 1990) confirms that there are two types of paying attention strategy—directed attention and selective attention. The directed attention refers to concentrating on a task, while selective attention refers to selection of what to do. Meanwhile, memorization is included in the cognitive learning strategy (O'Malley et al., 1985). However, there are arguments that memorization may have both positive and negative outcomes. Information learned through memorization may only be retained in the short-term memory, while information that is actively used in a longer period of time may be retained longer (Baddeley, 1999).

Student B also indicates that one of the speaking problems is the existence of a partner in practice speaking and the feeling of reserved and shy when they must speak English. This problem can be solved by joining a speaking club where students can practice regularly with various interesting topics and tutorial sessions. In addition, student B also use Google Translate as a tool to help her figure out vocabulary to express something. The use of Google Translate should also be adjusted. Not all translation results are appropriate and can be used in varied contexts. Therefore, technology literacy is crucial as it is useful for students to make decision on which information is the right one. A positive finding of this study is that student B indicates that after a long process of learning,

she becomes more confident in speaking. This indicates that the learning strategies that she has picked up for her learning work in some ways to help her struggle for better learning.

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings and discussion, it can be summarized that students use learning strategies that they think are beneficial for them. The compensation and metacognitive strategies are two strategies employed by the participants in this study. However, they are also indicated to use other strategies such as paying attentions to their peers, memorizing, and using applications to help them learn better. It is recommended that students may not know types of learning strategies therefore it is crucial to teach them varied learning strategies and how they can use them effectively.

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