

THE USE OF ENGLISH LEARNING STRATEGIES: A STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT NORTHEAST NORMAL UNIVERSITY, CHINA

การศึกษาการใช้กลยุทธ์การเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาต่างชาติ
มหาวิทยาลัยนอร์เทีสเตอร์มอล ประเทศสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีน

Kiattichai Saitakham

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,

Rajabhat Rajanagarindra University

E-mail: saitakham@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate English learning strategies employed by postgraduate international students at School of Education Sciences, Northeast Normal University (NENU), China. The samples were composed of purposively selected 14 students from 12 countries. The research instruments were questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The arithmetic means (\bar{X}) was performed to analyze the quantitative data, while the content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. Language learning strategies were grouped into six categories for assessment: 1. memory strategies for storing and retrieving information, 2. cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, 3. compensation strategies for overcoming limitations in language learning, 4. meta-cognitive strategies for planning and monitoring learning, 5. affective strategies for controlling emotions, motivation, and 6. social strategies for cooperating with others in language learning.

The quantitative results reported that the students most frequently used compensation strategies and the least frequently used was the affective strategies. In addition, the qualitative data revealed the student's opinions that social strategies were the most important whereas compensation strategies were the least important.

KEYWORDS : Language learning strategies, English learning strategies, Foreign language learning

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาพฤติกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาชาวต่างชาติระดับบัณฑิตศึกษา คณะวิทยาศาสตร์การศึกษามหาวิทยาลัยนอร์เทิร์นอินเดียนา ประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา กลุ่มตัวอย่างประกอบด้วยนักศึกษารวม 14 คน จาก 12 ประเทศโดยใช้วิธีการคัดเลือกแบบเจาะจง เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูลคือแบบสอบถามและการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก ค่าเฉลี่ยเลขคณิต (\bar{X}) นำมาใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณ ส่วนข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพนั้นถูกนำมาวิเคราะห์โดยวิธีการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา (content analysis) พฤติกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษที่ศึกษานั้นแบ่งออกเป็น 6 พฤติกรรมคือ 1. พฤติกรรมด้านการจำซึ่งเป็นพฤติกรรมใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูลความรู้ไว้และนำออกมาใช้เมื่อต้องการ 2. พฤติกรรมด้านความรู้ความคิดซึ่งเป็นพฤติกรรมเพื่อความเข้าใจและการผลิตภาษา 3. พฤติกรรมด้านขีดความสามารถซึ่งเป็นพฤติกรรมที่ใช้ข้อจำกัดในการเรียนรู้ภาษา 4. พฤติกรรมที่นำไปสู่ความสำเร็จซึ่งเป็นพฤติกรรมที่ใช้ในการวางแผนการเรียน ใช้ในการประเมินผลและตรวจสอบข้อผิดพลาดในการเรียนรู้ภาษา 5. พฤติกรรมด้านอารมณ์หรือพฤติกรรมจิตพิสัยซึ่งเป็นพฤติกรรมใช้เพื่อควบคุมอารมณ์และการส่งเสริมในการเรียนรู้ภาษา 6. พฤติกรรมด้านสังคมซึ่งเป็นพฤติกรรมสำหรับการปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้อื่นในการเรียนรู้ภาษา

ผลการวิจัยจากข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณปรากฏว่านักศึกษาใช้พฤติกรรมการขีดความสามารถมากที่สุดและใช้พฤติกรรมด้านอารมณ์หรือพฤติกรรมจิตพิสัยน้อยในการเรียนรู้ภาษา และผลการวิจัยจากข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพแสดงให้เห็นว่านักศึกษาคิดว่าพฤติกรรมด้านสังคมเป็นพฤติกรรมที่สำคัญที่สุด ในขณะที่พฤติกรรมการขีดความสามารถเป็นพฤติกรรมที่สำคัญน้อยที่สุดในการเรียนรู้ภาษา

คำสำคัญ : พฤติกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษา พฤติกรรมการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ การเรียนรู้ภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

Learning strategies are very important for learners. They can help them to continue to learn on their own outside the classroom. Moreover, if teachers can identify learning behavior tendencies, learners can understand the needs of them, and help them develop appropriate strategies that may enhance their language learning.

Over the decades, many researchers have viewed language learning strategies in associated with the behaviors and thoughts (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986); techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions (Chamot, 1990); behaviors or actions (Oxford, 1990). Green and Oxford (1995) stated that language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that students used, often intentionally to improve their target language skills. Ellis (1994) defined language learning strategies as attempts to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language. Moreover, Oxford (1990) also stated

that language learning strategies are specific methods or techniques used by individual learners to facilitate the comprehension, retention, retrieval and application of information for language learning and acquisition. Cohen (1998) defined learning strategies as the processes which learners use consciously in enhancing the storage, retention, recall, and application of knowledge about the language that they are learning. Oxford (1990) grouped them into six domains: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, comprehension strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Memory strategies are those concerning with entering new information into memory storage and retrieving it when need for communication. Cognitive strategies are those dealing with identification, grouping, retention and storage of language materials. Compensation strategies involve guessing and using gestures to fill any gaps in the knowledge of the language. Meta-cognitive strategies

are processes which learners use consciously in order to supervise or manage their language learning. These strategies allow learners to control their cognition by planning, checking, and evaluating what they learn. Affective strategies involve emotions, motivation, and attitudes which learners can employ to reduce anxiety, to gain self-encouragement, and, to promote learning positively. Social strategies involve facilitating interaction by asking question and cooperating with others in the learning process. These strategies are what the learners use to interact with other learners or with native speakers.

Background of the Study

The importance of language learning strategies in language learning has been proved and emphasized worldwide. Learners' language learning strategies are one of the key dimensions for successful language learning. Studies in the field of second language acquisition have indicated that the success of acquiring a new language does not just depend on how early learner starts to learn or expose to the language but also depends on the strategies which they employ consciously or unconsciously in the learning process. Many studies have been done to address the question why some language learners succeed but some do not and try to explore the strategy use of successful learners. Indeed, it has been proved that there are strategies which help language learners to achieve their goals, and good language learners frequently use different strategies than poorer language learners (Gass & Selinker, 2001). According to Ellis (1994), good language learners usually demonstrate common traits such as showing concern for formal properties of the target language, the ability to switch in attending to meaning, active involvement in the learning process, awareness of the learning process and, making use of the meta-cognitive knowledge to direct their learning. The

choice of strategies does not just depend on learners' levels of proficiency. However, their beliefs about language learning, their ages and motivations, their personal backgrounds as well as the situational and social contexts can affect them greatly in terms of preferences for certain strategies which best fit them in their learning of the target language. The question that what constitutes a good learning strategy is still in debate and studies about successful learners and less successful ones continue to reveal new aspects of language learning strategies.

One of the major goals of higher education is to cultivate students' attitudes, habits and competence as a lifelong learner. Knowles (1976) pointed out that teachers have to help learners develop the attitude and concept that learning is a lifetime process, and learners need to be equipped with the skills of self-directed lifelong learning. Applying the idea to language learning, language learning itself is a lifelong task, and language learning strategy is the skill for learners' self-directed language learning. All language learners use certain types of language learning strategies to a certain level, but there are differences in the frequency and choice of use among different learners (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). According to Oxford (1990), successful language learners have the ability to orchestrate and combine particular types of language learning strategies in effective ways according to their own learning needs. Therefore, to facilitate the learners' language learning and to promote learner autonomy, language learning strategy is a key point for instructors to pay attention to. In addition, many studies on language strategy use has indicated great concerns in identifying the relationships between learner characteristics and learning outcome; the links between strategies use and success; the differences in terms of gender, cultural backgrounds affecting learners' use of strategies; and so on.

Nevertheless, there are few studies dedicated specifically to the means by which students learn. Bremner (1999) pointed out that second language (L2) learners who learn in the first language environment, such as in the U.S., the U.K., or Australia will have good opportunities to practice their English. It is possible that L2 learners can interact and learn how the language is used by native English speakers. Learning in such an environment can be challenging as the students can not rely on first language for comprehension as they do in an EFL context such as learning English in China, Japan, Thailand. Unlike advanced learners, beginner and intermediate learners are assumed to have to struggle more in the process of learning. Therefore, ESL context may be beneficial to some but not all of the learners (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). Many studies on learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; O'Mally, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanres, Kupper & Russo, 1985; Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989) revealed that there was not a unique strategy that every learner should apply in order to be successful in learning the target language. Rather, it depends on the learner's cultural and psychological background that they decide to use strategies that suit them.

However, very few studies have focused on the English learning strategy used by an international group of postgraduate students. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate English learning strategies employed by this group, bearing in mind their cultural, educational, age, and gender differences.

Methodology

The samples were composed of purposively selected 14 postgraduate international students at the School of Education Sciences, Northeast Normal University (NENU), China. They are from Nepal, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Zambia, Colombia, Nigeria, Malawi, Djibouti,

Eritrean, Congo, Thailand and Mongolia.

The research instrument is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Questionnaire (SILL Questionnaire Version 7.0). It was adapted from Oxford (1990). In the questionnaire, language learning strategies are grouped into six categories for assessment: memory strategies for storing and retrieving information, cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, compensation strategies for overcoming limitations in language learning, meta-cognitive strategies for planning and monitoring learning, affective strategies for controlling emotions, motivation, and social strategies for cooperating with others in language learning. It consisted of two sections. In part one, students were asked of their demographic information. In part two, students were asked to rate the frequency of use for their English learning strategies on the scale of 1-5: 5 = always or almost always true, 4 = usually true, 3 = somewhat true, 2 = usually not true, and 1 = never or almost never true.

Mean scores derived from the scale were calculated and interpreted based on the criteria as 4.50-5.00 = always or almost always true, 3.50-4.49 = usually true, 2.50-3.49 = somewhat true, 1.50-2.49 = usually not true, and 1.00-1.49 = always or almost always true.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was calculated for the arithmetic means (\bar{X}). These means indicated the average levels for using English learning strategies. The in-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated for collecting the qualitative data. The content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data for summarizing the students' opinion towards using English learning strategies.

Findings

A. Findings from the quantitative data

The findings are presented and discussed

according to the main purpose of the investigation of English learning strategies employed by postgraduate international students at the School of Education Sciences, Northeast Normal University (NENU), China. Each answer is based on the data collected from the students by means of the questionnaire.

1. Students' employment of each English learning strategy

The findings of the study reveal that most students

use compensation strategies in their second language learning with the mean of 3.27. Compensation is followed by meta-cognitive strategies which had the mean of 3.23. The findings also reveal that memory strategies with the mean score of 2.79 come third, and fourth are social strategies with 2.67 as mean and last are affective strategies with the average score of 2.33 as shown in the table 1.

Table 1 Mean rating of students' employment of each English learning strategy

English Vocabulary Learning Strategies	\bar{X}	S.D.
Compensation Strategies	3.27	0.43
Meta-cognitive Strategies	3.23	0.76
Cognitive Strategies	3.12	0.63
Memory Strategies	2.79	0.65
Social Strategies	2.67	0.67
Affective Strategies	2.33	0.84

2. Students' behaviors of each English learning strategy

2.1 The students' behaviors of compensation strategies for learning English

The compensation behaviors of the participants show that many of them try to guess what the other

persons will say next in English with the mean score of 3.40. In this category, three other behaviors had the same mean score of 3.20, showing that there is a wide use of compensation strategies by many second language learners.

Table 2 Mean rating of the students' behaviors of compensation strategies for learning English

Behavior of Compensation Strategies	\bar{X}	S.D.
- I try to guess what the other person will say next in English	3.40	0.97
- To understand unfamiliar English words I make guesses	3.30	1.16
- I read English without looking up every new word	3.30	0.95
- If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing	3.20	1.14
- When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	3.20	1.03
- I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English	3.20	0.92
Total	3.27	0.43

2.2 The students' behaviors of meta-cognitive strategies for learning English

Regarding meta-cognitive strategies for learning English, the results show that many participants are

able to notice their English mistakes, hence they use that information to help them do better. The behaviors employed the least frequently are the items 34 and 38. These have a mean score of 2.70 each.

Table 3 Mean rating of the students' behaviors of meta-cognitive strategies for learning English

Behavior of Meta-Cognitive Strategies	\bar{X}	S.D.
- I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better	3.80	0.91
- I pay attention when someone is speaking English	3.70	1.34
- I try to find as many ways as I can use my English	3.40	0.97
- I look for people I can talk to in English	3.30	1.25
- I have clear goals for improving my English skills	3.20	1.23
- I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English	3.20	1.03
- I try to find out how to be a better learner of English	3.10	1.10
- I plan my schedule so that I will have enough time to study English	2.70	1.49
- I think about my progress in learning English	2.70	1.33
Total	3.23	0.76

2.3 The students' behaviors of cognitive strategies for learning English

The table below shows that the students' behavior of cognitive strategy is based on written language. This

is shown by the high mean score of the students who write notes, message, letter, or report in English. The least cognitive behavior employed is dividing the English words into parts to find the meaning.

Table 4 Mean rating of the students' behaviors of cognitive strategies for learning English

Behavior of Cognitive Strategies	\bar{X}	S.D.
- I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English	3.70	1.25
- I start conversations in English	3.60	0.97
- I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English	3.50	1.08
- I use the English words I know in different ways	3.50	0.97
- I read for pleasure in English	3.40	1.17
- I first skim-read an English passage (read over the passage quickly), then go back and read carefully	3.40	0.97
- I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to the movies spoken in English	3.20	1.14
- I try to find patterns in English	3.20	1.14
- I try to talk like native English speakers	3.00	1.16
- I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English	2.90	1.52
- I practice the sounds of English	2.90	1.10
- I say or write new English words several times	2.80	1.32
- I try not to translate word for word	2.40	1.08
- I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand	2.20	0.79
Total	3.12	0.63

2.4 The students' behaviors of memory strategies for learning English

The information in the table below shows that most students usually think of the relationship between

what they know, store, and retrieve the new things they learn in English. The least frequently used behavior is the use of flashcards to remember new English words which had a mean score of 1.80

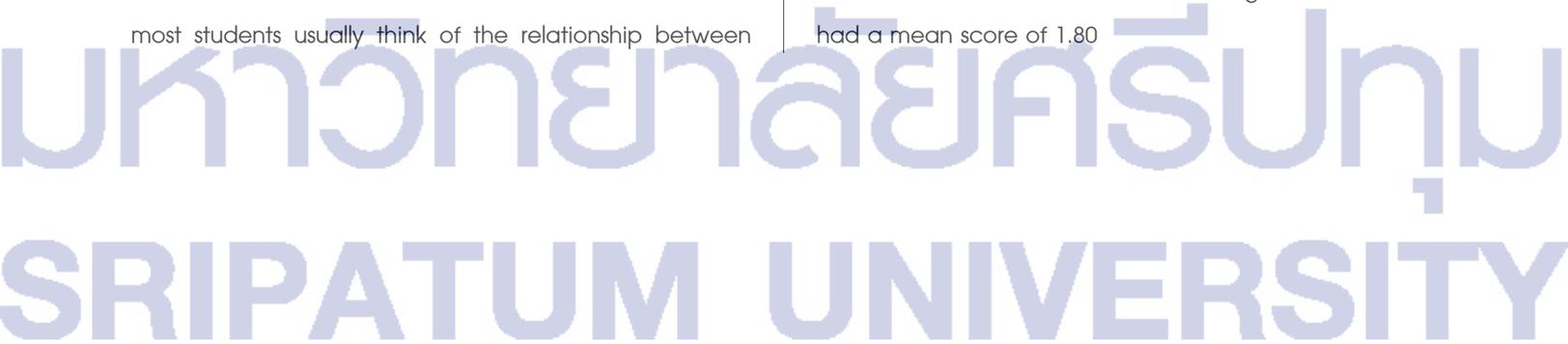


Table 5 Mean rating of the students' behaviors of memory strategies for learning English

Behavior of Memory Strategies	\bar{X}	S.D.
- I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English	3.60	0.84
- I use new English words in a sentence so that I can remember them	3.40	0.70
- I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used	3.30	1.25
- I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word	2.90	1.37
- I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign	2.70	0.95
- I use rhymes to remember new English words	2.60	1.17
- I review English lessons often	2.60	1.17
- I physically act out new English words	2.20	0.92
- I use flashcards to remember new English words	1.80	0.80
Total	2.75	0.65

2.5 The students' behaviors of social strategies for learning English

Findings on the students' behaviors of social strategies for learning English reveal that many students

ask questions in English, while the least frequently used behaviors are to ask English speakers to correct them when they talk, to practice English with other students, and to try learning about the culture of English speakers.

Table 6 Mean rating of the students' behaviors of social strategies for learning English

Behavior of Social Strategies	\bar{X}	S.D.
- I ask questions in English	3.30	0.95
- If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again	3.00	1.16
- I ask for help from English speakers	2.70	1.42
- I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk	2.50	1.08
- I practice English with other students	2.50	1.08
- I try to learn about the culture of English speakers	2.50	1.08
Total	2.67	0.67

2.6 The students' behaviors of affective strategies for learning English

The information shows that the students usually give themselves a reward or treat when they do well in

English. This behavior had a mean score of 2.90. Very few of students however write down their feelings in a language learning diary.

Table 7 Mean rating of the students' behaviors of affective strategies for learning English

Behavior of Affective Strategies	\bar{X}	S.D.
- I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English	2.90	1.02
- I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake	2.50	1.18
- I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English	2.50	1.08
- I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English	2.50	1.08
- I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English	2.00	0.94
- I write down my feelings in a language learning diary	1.60	0.84
Total	2.33	0.76

B. Findings from the qualitative data

The qualitative data reveal the student's opinions that social strategies are the most important. This is because they think that social strategies are easy to learn with others. Through asking questions, they can make connections of their own mistakes. Moreover, the essential learning can take place through an environment of interaction and where there is a vacillator and also co-operation from the learners. From the students' opinions, the interview data also shows that compensation strategies are the least important strategies. These strategies involve guessing and using the gestures to fill any gaps in the knowledge of the language. However, they believe that guessing cannot be applicable in most situations.

Discussion of the Findings

The results of this study show that subjects generally use compensation, meta-cognitive, cognitive, memory, social, and affective language learning strategies respectively. However, the results demonstrate that although universally, international students use a variety of strategies in learning language including English, the most commonly used strategies appears to be the compensation. This is irrespective of the learning environment and the manner of acquisition.

Compensation strategies, which involve guessing intelligently in listening and reading as well as overcoming limitations in speaking and writing, are used as crucial means of communication embodying all four skills. They are reported to be used more frequently in formal language learning environments (Bremmer, 1999), where learners run into communication breakdowns due to inadequate or missing knowledge.

The findings of this study clearly show that compensation strategies are equally useful for learners acquiring a foreign language naturalistically because there is no tutoring involved in repairing the communication breakdown. Furthermore, the learners' focus on compensation and to a degree on cognitive strategies notwithstanding the nature of the learning context, as these involve the target language itself. However, an interesting relationship seems to emerge between the learning context and the type of indirect strategy preferred. In addition, the role of meta-cognitive strategies in the instructed learning of English is significantly higher than in the naturalistic acquisition of English. This is to be expected since meta-cognitive strategies, which allow learners to regulate their cognition, generally support classroom language learning.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that language learner's preferences of learning strategies do not differ whether the environment is formal or informal. However, compensation and meta-cognitive strategies are frequently used by the participants and affective and social strategies are not frequently used. The study also suggests that language learners differ in language learning strategy use. These differences could be related to cultural and individual differences. Therefore, since characteristics such as proficiency level, gender, cultural background and age have a great influence on their choice of language strategy use one strategy cannot be rated as best. As the results in this study are based on answers to a questionnaire, the strategies reported are those that the subjects perceived themselves as using.

Further research is therefore needed to determine if these strategies are in fact used during language learning. This is especially important in the case of meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies. For this reason, an in-depth study into actual mental processes involving language learning should be conducted using procedures such as immediate verbalization. In addition, more research is needed to understand students' selection of strategies within each major group of strategies. Additionally, studies should focus on the influence of some demographic information like age, gender, and cultural background on the choice of English language strategies as the present study had little to do with them.

All in all, there is no satisfactory conclusion about which strategies are good for every learner to use. The preference of one strategy over the other does not mean that it is the best.

References

Bremmer, S. 1999. "Language learning strategies

and language proficiency: Investigating the relationship in Hong Kong." *Canadian Modern Language Review*. 55, 4: 490-514.

Cohen, A. D. 1998. *Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language*. London: Longman.

Cohen, A. D. & Dornyei, Z. 2002. "Focus on the language learner: Motivation, styles and strategies." In N. Schmidt (Ed.), *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. London: Arnold.

Chamot, A. C. 1990. *Language Learning Styles*. New York: Arnold.

Chamot, A. C. & Kupper, L. 1989. *Linguistic Knowledge, How learners learn language*. London: Oxford.

Ellis, R. 1994. *The study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gass S. & Selinker L. 2001. *Innovation in Language Education*. Philadelphia: Open University press.

Green, J. M. and Oxford, R. 1995. "A closer look at learning strategies, L2 proficiency, and gender." *TESOL Quarterly*. 29, 261-297.

Knowles, M. 1976. *The Psychology of Language*. New York: Routeledge.

O'Malley, J. & Chamot, A. U. 1990. *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

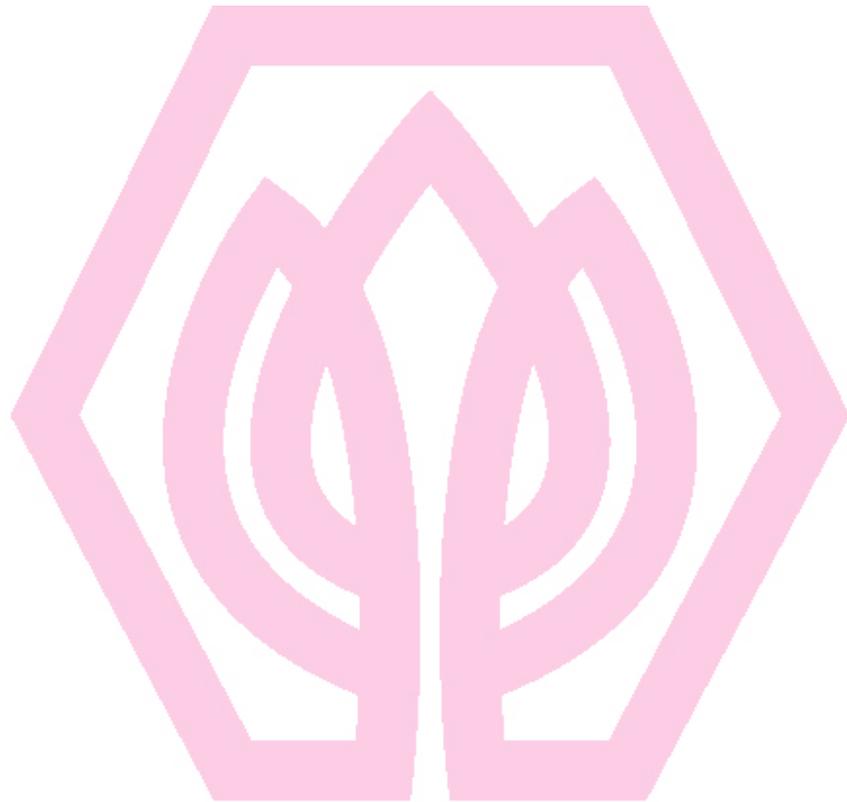
O'Malley, J., Chamot, A. U., Stewner-Manzanres, G., Kupper, L. and Russo, R. P. 1985. "Learning strategies used by beginning and intermediate ESL students." *Language Learning*. 35, 21-46.

Oxford, R. 1990. *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Oxford, R. and Nyikos, M. 1989. "Variable affecting choice of language learning strategies by university students." *Modern Language Journal*. 73, 291-300.

Weinstein, C. E. and Mayer, R. E. 1986. "The teaching of learning strategies." In Croft, M. K. (ed.).

Handbook of research on teaching. New York: Macmillan.



มหาวิทยาลัยศรีปทุม

SRI PATUM UNIVERSITY



>> Kiattichai Saitakham

Kiattichai Saitakham was born in Thailand, in 1978. He received B.Ed. (English) from Chiangmai Rajabhat University, Thailand, in 2000, and M.A. degree in English from Naresuan University, Thailand, in 2002. He was awarded of UNESCO/China (The Great Wall) Co-Sponsored Fellowships Programme 2008/2009 as a Senior Scholar in "Higher Education" at Northeast Normal University, China.

At present, He is an English Lecturer at Rajabhat Rajanagarindra University, Thailand. His research interest includes educational technology enhance learning, EFL learning strategies, and autonomous learning.