

English Learning Strategies among EFL Learners: A Narrative Approach

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Abstract

Language learning strategies (LLSs) are believed to be influenced by individual differences as well as environmental and contextual factors. Therefore, the effective use of LLSs is determined by various factors, including both learning and learner variables. This dynamic and complex nature of LLSs renders it appropriate to use a qualitative approach to undertake research into this issue. This paper details the qualitative findings from a larger-scale study on English LLSs among tertiary students in the context of Vietnam. The data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with 10 English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching staff and 10 EFL students at a university in Vietnam. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese lasting 30 to 40 minutes, and were audio recorded with consent. The interview questions for students focussed on their general attitudes and lived experiences of LLSs. Similarly, the interview questions for EFL staff were structured around their general attitudes. The interview data were translated into English, rechecked, and thematically analysed. The findings are of a textual and interpretative nature with emerging themes and issues related to the attitudes towards and actual use of LLSs among the target learners. The findings provide practical implications for practitioners, researchers and educational policy makers alike.

Keywords: language learning strategies, Vietnamese, English, second language learning, tertiary students

1 Introduction

1.1 Successful Language Learning Strategies

In the field of second/foreign language teaching and learning, the interests of practitioners and researchers have been geared to the language learning strategies (LLSs) selection and adoption of successful language learners. The suggestion that a good language learner may have some special strategies that others could learn from was initially introduced by Rubin (1975). Using a mixed methods approach including classroom observation, self-observation, and interviews, Rubin proposed a list of seven characteristics of good language learners. They include the ability to make good guesses, communicate in many ways, tolerate mistakes, pay attention to form and communication, practise the language regularly, monitor one's own language use, and understand and attend to meaning.

With the same goal, to help less successful learners enhance their success, Stern (1975) introduced his description of good language learners with ten LLSs, which were drawn from his interpretation of language competence and second language acquisition; his experience as a teacher and learner; and his review of the literature of language learning. The most significant elements in his proposed strategies were the initiative and activeness of the learners in approaching a learning task or problem. Findings by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) have been supported and further developed by many subsequent researchers in the field (Green & Oxford, 1995; Naiman, Froehlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Rubin & Thompson, 1982).

These early research studies have set the scene for an emerging interest in how language learners themselves go about learning and what teachers can do to assist learners during that process. However, Rubin (1975) recognized the influence that many variables, such as target language proficiency, age, situation, cultural differences and learning styles, may have on the deployment of LLSs. As such, Naiman et al. (1978, p. 224) stressed that there were no “predetermined overall characteristics” among good language learners due to the various individual pathways that could lead to successful language learning. This emphasis on individual variation in LLS use has become a principle for most research efforts in the field. On the one hand, it highlights the issue of individual differences and underscores the flexibility in language learning strategy deployment. On the other hand, it puts a restriction on the generalizations to any target population beyond the sample of any research findings about the good language learners.

1.2 Learning Environment and LLSs

According to socio-cultural theory, social interaction and cultural institutions play an important role in an individual's cognitive growth and development (Donato & MacCormick, 1994). From this socio-cultural perspective, the learning environment and contexts are influential upon individuals' strategic orientations to language learning. Scarcella and Oxford (1992), Lantoff and Appel (1994) and Donato and MacCormick (1994) discovered that social interaction had a crucial role to play in LLS use. Likewise, Gao (2006) pointed to the dynamicity of LLS selection and use under the influence of different learning contexts. His comparative qualitative study suggested that the popular language learning discourses and assessment methods had influenced the learners' frequency and choices of strategy use.

More recently, Huang and Andrews (2010) examined the impact of the learning context and environment on LLS use among 47 senior secondary students in mainland China. Their findings revealed that in the mainstream exam-orientated environment of Mainland China, the general orientation of strategies for a variety of classroom learning tasks was determined by

the “grade-getting” goal. In addition, the results indicated that the processes of strategy development and use were mediated by learners' situated learning experience; by cultural artefacts (tasks); and by interpersonal interactions with their teachers, peers and family members. From a holistic view, the learners' strategy employment was situated in their communities of language learning practices and social cultures.

The use of LLS reflects individual differences and they have a propensity to be continuously shaped and reshaped by the environmental and contextual factors. The dynamicity and complexity of LLSs are under the influence of different learning contexts and environments, which render it appropriate to use a qualitative approach to undertake investigations. This is particularly vital when examining the LLSs among tertiary students in Vietnam, where research into LLS remains in the early stages of development (Duong & Nguyen, 2006).

The overall study aimed to examine the frequency and patterns of LLS use among Vietnamese EFL tertiary students; the relationship between LLS use and self-rated English proficiency; and the specific aim here was to investigate and evaluate the use of LLS among Vietnamese EFL students and staff in the context of Vietnam.

2 Methods

This study utilized the conceptual framework of socio-cultural theory, in that learning is a social process where the development of cognition occurs through the interaction with others in a society and also influenced by the culture where an individual is situated (Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2015). As such, in this study, the perceptions, attitudes and experiences concerning actual strategy use under the influence of socio-cultural factors were examined qualitatively using in-depth interviews.

2.1 Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit the study participants, who were deemed information-rich cases (Patton, 2002), and therefore could represent the best to “understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2011, p. 206). The sample consisted of 10 English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching staff and 10 EFL students at a university in Vietnam. The staff, including 3 males and 7 females, were between 26 and 50 years of age and their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 20 years at tertiary level. The sampled students were also chosen to reflect the diversity of backgrounds in terms of gender (3 males, 7 females); self-rated English proficiency (ranging from Limited to Very Good); and academic major (both English and non-English majors).

2.2 Data Collection Tool and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Two interview guides were prepared for student and staff participants based on a review of relevant literature. The interview questions for students were designed to focus on their general attitudes and their own lived experiences of LLSs. Similarly, the interview questions for EFL staff were structured around their general attitudes. Open ended questions beginning with “what”, “how”, or “have you ever” were mainly used to probe for meaning-rich responses (See Appendix 1).

The interview questions were pretested among 4 participants who belonged to the target population. The participants were asked about the appropriateness of the questions and the ease of understanding the questions. If questions were considered too personal or sensitive, the

participants were asked how these questions could be altered. This process of prestressing improved question development and refinement.

Each interview was conducted in Vietnamese, was between 30 and 40 minutes and was audio recorded with the consent of each participant. The interview data were then translated into English, rechecked and coded to ensure confidentiality.

2.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from the interviews were transcribed, organized and analysed with the assistance of the qualitative research software package, QSR NVivo 9. Initially, descriptive coding was performed to help with the data identification. Accordingly, student participants were coded on the basis of their demographic information such as gender (M/F), year group (Y1, Y2, Y3), or academic major (E for English major and NE for Non-English major). Likewise, information about gender (F/M) and the interview order (1, 2, 3 and so on) was used to code the data of the teacher participants.

This study utilized a constant comparative method of analysis in organizing the gathered data to enable thematic analysis of the content. The constant comparative method is a process of comparing and contrasting

all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence, etc. The goal is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns. (Tesch, 1990, p. 96)

During this process, data considered critical to the research aims and the intended analysis were systematically organized into themes and subthemes (Boeije, 2002; Fram, 2013). This process allowed the researcher to determine the key categories or concepts and make logical connections between these categories.

3 Results and Discussion

The richness of the qualitative data collected in this study allowed for a clear understanding of the complex web of perceptions, and attitudes in relation to LLSs, which might have an impact on the day-to-day teaching and learning practices of the EFL teacher and student participants. According to the analysis, a number of key themes emerged, including: 1) the role of LLSs; 2) recommended and non-recommended strategies; 3) barriers to LLS development; and 4) shared characteristics of strategy use.

3.1 The Role of LLSs

The data drawn from the staff interviews suggested that there was a unanimous acknowledgement of the importance of LLSs in the learning process, although they were believed to play various roles in English learning. To illustrate what teacher participants were inferring, some selected comments are provided below.

I think English learning strategies are very important for learners to boost their language learning and have scaffolding to pursue their lifelong language learning on their own. (Teacher 2-F)

Strategies are really important in directing and orienting students in their learning. I think without learning strategies, learning will become a passive process. (Teacher 7-F)

I think to be good learners; it is a must to have the right learning strategies. (Teacher 10-F)

Coinciding with the overall positive attitude of the teacher participants towards LLSs, most student interviewees placed an importance on the role of LLSs in their language achievement. Most students indicated that strategies contributed a great deal to the learning process, especially by enhancing the effectiveness and quality of learning. The attitudes of the student participants were clearly reflected in the following remarks:

English learning is a complex and long-term process, so we need to have the right strategies in order to master the target language in the most effective way and in the shortest time. I believe about 80% of our success in English learning is determined by strategies. (Student 3-F-Y3-E)

I think learning strategies are very important in our success in learning English because having the right strategies will help increase the effectiveness of our learning process and reduce the time needed to achieve a learning target. (Student 6-M-Y2-N)

Among the factors that contribute to our success in learning English, learning strategies are the most important. In fact, they play the deciding role. (Student 7-F-Y1-N)

The significant role of LLSs, in some cases, meant that students would encounter many difficulties in learning English if they did not use learning strategies in an effective way. Commenting on this issue, one student participant specified a case from her observations:

I think strategies have an extremely important role in learning English... I have seen one IT [Information Technology] student struggling with English learning and when I approached him, I can say that improper use of learning strategies is what hinders him from progressing. (Student 10-F-Y4-E)

This is an encouraging finding because the positive attitudes of teachers and students will be a favourable prerequisite for the promotion of LLSs in the educational system. Other researchers (e.g. Jiang & Smith, 2009; Zhang & Goh, 2006) have also found similar results regarding the belief of students in the usefulness and significant role of LLSs. As Richardson (1996) stated, learners are expected to act mostly upon their beliefs and Rokeach (1968, p. 113) indicated beliefs or attitudes are “predispositions to actions”. When students place an emphasis on the role of LLSs, they are more likely to invest time and effort into the exploration of learning strategies to enhance performance.

However, learning strategies alone cannot determine success in English learning, despite their crucial role. In order to achieve the ultimate goal of mastering English, many student interviewees stated that there were other contributing factors. Those factors were, for example, an interest in English, an aptitude for language learning, effort investment in learning, or determination. The following comments typically illustrate the views of the student participants regarding this issue.

To me, besides learning strategies, we need to be persistent and hardworking. Once we have set a certain goal, whether it is short-term or long-term, we have to try to achieve

it. So, learning strategy is necessary, but they are not enough to guarantee success. (Student 2-F-Y2-E)

Strategies play a very important role... But strategies alone are not enough. It requires other factors as well, such as an interest in learning the language and an aptitude for the language. (Student 4-F-Y1-E)

In my view, learning strategies contribute to decide success in English performance, along with time, and effort. (Student 5-F-Y4-E)

3.2 Recommended and Non-recommended Strategies

During the interviews, the teacher and student participants shared their experiences in LLS use and their stories revealed specific strategies which were either recommended or non-recommended in English learning. On the part of the teachers, their judgment about the effectiveness of certain strategies was built upon their own experiences as a successful language learner and as a keen observer of their students' performance. The strategies considered to be essential were broadly associated with learning skills, such as reading, speaking, listening or writing. These strategies served as an important guidance for the teachers in shaping their approaches in everyday English teaching. The following comments specify those highly recommended strategies.

In my reading classes, semantic mapping, using related words or pictures and words, getting the idea quickly like skimming or scanning, guessing intelligibly, analysing, summarizing are especially emphasized. (Teacher 2-F)

The strategies I think students need in writing are recording English phrases, using English-English dictionaries, keeping a diary or a blog in English, and writing a new piece based on a structured model. (Teacher 7-F)

Regarding speaking skills, I guess students need certain strategies such as imitating a particular speaker in terms of pronunciation, intonation, stress, gesture, eye contact, etc. A good strategy is to imagine specific situations and say things in their mind or to themselves. (Teacher 8-M)

Although the list of effective strategies specified by the teachers was not exhaustive, they were valid strategies, which had been implemented and observed to work within the classroom by the teachers within study. This general agreement on their effectiveness provided an indication of the value of these strategies.

On the other hand, the lived experiences among the students regarding their use of strategies in English learning uncovered several ineffective strategies, especially within English learning at the tertiary level. When experimenting with various learning strategies, the students realized that not every strategy contributed positively to their learning. These strategies were often related to the traditional learning of vocabulary and grammar, which were very popular at more junior levels of education, such as high school. This was illustrated by the following comments:

Talking about grammar, just like many of my friends, I did a lot of exercises in grammar books, but I did not learn much from them. When it comes to actual use in real life, I cannot recall any of what I've learned from books. (Student 4-F-Y1-E)

I remember when I was in grade 8, my English teacher told me and my friends to learn new words by rewriting 10 times each. I did, but it did not work for me. It seemed to be a waste of time because although I can remember the spelling of the word, it does not mean that I can use it when I need. (Student 5-F-Y4-E)

While some students did not feel there was value through traditional strategies, such as grammar exercises or rewriting new words, other students acknowledged their value at a certain stage of their learning. Students dropped certain strategies only because those strategies no longer satisfied their learning needs at the current level. Two students stated:

I used to rewrite words several times until I remember the spellings of words. It worked for me those days. It did. But I have stopped using that strategy. Now I try to learn the whole sentence that includes the new word. (Student 7-F-Y1-N)

At high school, I was taught to translate a complete sentence from English into Vietnamese and rewrite these two sentences many times to remember them. I think that's an appropriate strategy for low level learners... looking back I still think it is an effective strategy to build vocabulary and it also helps with my translation skills later on. (Student 3-F-Y3-E)

Researchers in Southeast Asia, such as LoCastro (1994), reported similar observations. In a study of 28 Japanese EFL graduate students, LoCastro found that purposefulness of language learning underpins LLS use. For example, when the students were in junior and senior high school, they were mainly interested in passing the examination and employed memorization strategies to achieve this outcome.

The discussion on recommended and non-recommended learning strategies is closely associated with the discussion on the purposefulness of those strategies. Purposefulness or intentionality is considered the most vital attribute of a learning strategy and has received consensus from researchers across various fields. As suggested by Paris, Lipson, and Wixson (1983), a strategy is intentionally selected, actively engaged in, and consciously monitored and evaluated to achieve an aim or to solve a problem. According to Gu (2005), without a purpose, a learning behaviour or course of action cannot be considered strategic. This finding has a direct implication for LLS training which should be constructed around learning purposes or learning goals to ensure the effectiveness of the target strategies.

3.3 Barriers to LLS Development

While sharing their lived experiences, the teacher and student participants specified a number of barriers to the adoption of new LLSs. Firstly, the difficulties were associated with their prolonged attachment to previously developed strategies, which interfered with the use of new strategies. As indicated by Teacher 2-F, who stated “while reading, my students usually have trouble getting the idea quickly due to their habit of understanding every word”. Although the students tended to describe their difficulties more specifically, the hindrances were also related to their habitual learning behaviours. One student, for example, described his struggle with vocabulary learning without realizing that his traditional way of learning de-contextualized words from the dictionary did not seem to satisfy his current needs.

I have problems with learning new words. I normally set a goal for learning about 30–40 new words a day. I just pick them randomly from the dictionary. But it's difficult to put them into long-term memory and put them into use as well. (Student 1-M-Y1-E)

Another student was too familiar with reading word by word so found it hard to develop the skills of scanning and skimming in reading English materials.

I was taught to scan for main ideas and skim for details. However, I do not do much scanning because my mind keeps attending to details and I end up reading everything.
(Student 7-F-Y1-N)

The prolonged attachment to previously developed strategies may present a hindrance to LLS adoption due to the potential resistance to change and the hesitation to divert away from one's learning comfort zone. This finding is confirmed by O'Malley (1987), who asserted that Asian learners tended to exhibit a high persistence of familiar strategies which accounted for their common lack of success in language learning. In fact, these learning behaviours might have been repeatedly conditioned at lower schooling levels in Vietnam, such as junior or high school, into steadfast habits.

Therefore, it is suggested that changes can be influenced not only at the tertiary level, but also at lower levels of schooling so that students have opportunities to explore and adopt a variety of strategies to language learning at an earlier stage. The wider implication of this finding is related to professional training for language teachers across levels in the current system. The teachers themselves need to have adequate confidence, trust and competence in the promotion of diverse LLSs among students before they can contribute to the translation of rhetoric into genuine practice.

Secondly, additional challenges came from the lack of investment in terms of time and effort into the adoption of certain strategies. As Teacher 9-F observed, "many of my students do not have enough patience to learn and practice English learning strategies on a regular basis." The reflection from Teacher 10-F below also highlighted this lack of regular practice in strategies, which resulted in frustration among students.

Taking notes while listening causes a lot of difficulties for my students. You know that this is a difficult skill and it requires lots of practice. But it seems that my students haven't actually mastered the note-taking skills. So instead of having a positive impact on their listening comprehension, note-taking seems to impede their comprehension by the frustration and tension that it creates. (Teacher 10-F)

In the view of some teachers, the difficulties in adopting certain strategies were the consequences of combined deterrents, including the lack of motivation and time to master the strategies.

To improve their speaking skills... students need to spend time on practicing and seeking opportunities to try... the language like attending English-focused activities. However, it seems that some of them are a bit overloaded with schoolwork and are more interested in working part-time to gain work experience than improving their English skills.
(Teacher 4-F)

The lack of time to try new strategies, especially those related to expanding opportunities for English practice and usage, was also mentioned frequently by the students. Specifically, the students showed their desire to engage themselves in input-rich language learning environments, such as an English club; however, they were partly deterred by the time barrier.

I know our English club but I have never joined before. I heard that it is good, but I haven't found the time to join... I don't like the current curriculum because we are having a heavy learning load. It takes a great deal of time away from other English learning activities. (Student 1-M-Y1-E)

There is an English club at our university, but I haven't had the chance to attend it because of my limited time and my personal circumstances. (Student 6-M-Y2-N)

Notably, the integrated strategies, which normally require extensive practice such as those in handling a conversation in English or taking notes of a speech, were reported to cause difficulties for the students. Again, this point echoed the concern of the teachers.

Yes, when I tried to talk to foreigners... I had difficulty in expressing myself. I could see that the listeners were irritated when they couldn't understand what I wanted to say. I was frustrated and upset a lot. (Student 2-F-Y2-E)

I cannot use many of the note-taking skills that I have learned because the speaker normally speaks pretty fast. I have no time to think about the structure or process the main ideas so as to take notes effectively. (Student 8-M-Y2-N)

This lack of investment in terms of time and effort could be attributed to both subjective and objective factors. On the part of the students, most of their time and attention could have been devoted to the subject content areas rather than the strategies in approaching these subjects. Particularly with the integrated strategies that require persistent practice most students will probably be discouraged by initial failure before they could actually see the outcomes of their time and practice.

The main implication for language teachers and educators is to emphasize the acquisition of LLSs as the attainment of procedural knowledge rather than declarative knowledge and to provide on-going encouragement for students to experiment with the target strategies. On the part of educational administrators and providers, it is important to build a curriculum with reasonable workload and create ample opportunities outside of the classroom for students to explore diverse learning strategies to improve their language performance. An input- and output-rich environment is crucial (Krashen, 1981), and students must be allowed adequate time to engage themselves in that environment.

The last barrier emerging from the interviews was related to psychological factors. Some students stated that they lacked confidence in some language skills and were uncertain about the appropriateness of their current strategies. However, they demonstrated hesitation in approaching their teachers for help or guidance concerning a more effective manipulation of LLSs. This hesitation, mostly stemming from shyness or self-estrangement from teachers, presented a great barrier, which are evident in the statements as follows.

I sometimes ask my teachers for help when I make new sentences with new words, but I think they don't have enough time to answer all of my questions. So, I mostly study by myself and that's why I don't have much certainty in the way I use English. (Student 1-M-Y1-E)

I have difficulty in writing academic essays, but I rarely ask my teachers for advice, because somehow I still feel a distance between myself and my teachers although they

are very supportive. I think I have been feeling the same since I started schooling.
(Student 2-F-Y2-E)

In other cases, the psychological barrier resulted from students commencing their studies with ideas and beliefs concerning what would work for them, rather than experimenting with strategies provided within the classroom.

I think rewriting words to remember their spellings does not work for me, although I never try myself. (Student 1-M-Y1-E)

I read about skimming and scanning before, but I don't think they help with my speed and comprehension in reading. I have no intention to employ these strategies. (Student 8-M-Y2-N)

This finding supports much of the literature about Asian learners, who are widely described as shy and passive language learners. Usuki (2000), for example, examined the psychological barriers to the adoption of effective LLSs by Japanese students and suggested that their pre-formed beliefs prevented them from experimenting with the negatively-labelled strategies. The impact of this distrust may inhibit interest, develop an absence of self-training, increase a lack of confidence and ultimately produce a lack of skills when using strategies.

The most negative scenario among Vietnamese students would be either avoidance or under-utilization of strategies in their regular learning practice. It is important that language teachers be aware of the psychological hindrances that could deter their students from the effective adoption of LLSs and take appropriate measure to address these issues. More communication between teachers and students would be necessary to ensure better understanding. It has been suggested by many educators that teachers should spend time listening to students and engaging in interactive dialogue with them so as to establish an emotional connection and build a positive teacher-student rapport (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Hill & Hawk, 2000; Noddings, 1992).

3.4 Shared Characteristics of Strategy Use

A comprehensive analysis of the conversations with the students also resulted in the emergence of shared characteristics in their strategy use. These common characteristics were useful for the attempt to sketch a strategy profile of this learner group in the current context.

The first and most noticeable characteristic was that the students constructed their strategies through the interactions with teachers and peers. One student recalled being taught how to learn vocabulary by her former English teacher at junior high school and these experiences had shaped her learning strategies for most of her later learning (Student 5-F-Y4-E). The influence of teachers was clearly felt when most of the students mentioned their teachers as those who introduced and framed their current strategies. In addition, many students reported to benefit greatly in strategy instruction from their fellow students. This is illustrated by the story of Student 4.

My friends have a great impact on how I study English too. I observe what my friends do, those who are good in English, and then try to imitate them. (Student 4-F-Y1-E)

Although there are many theories that may explain this phenomenon, socio-cultural theory suggests that social interaction and cultural institutions play an important role in individuals' cognitive growth and development (Donato & MacCormick, 1994). Therefore, in this context,

a student's strategic orientation to language learning is influenced by classroom-based interaction. For example, Donato and McCormick (1994) highlighted the importance of social interaction, scaffolded learning and collaboration in building effective language classrooms. It is recommended from this finding that a situated strategy development community, as suggested by Huang and Andrews (2010), be introduced as part of language learning strategy instruction or training programs.

The second feature that characterized the students' use of strategies was that their adoption of strategies was more dynamic than static. Reflecting on their employment of strategies in learning English over the years, the students reported a tendency to change strategies to suit their learning needs.

Until grade 9, I just listened to music and watched movies. Since grade 10, I started reading books and stories in English. (Student 1-M-Y1-E)

I remembered when I started learning English, I studied with books all the time, doing exercises and trying to memorize the grammar rules... Later, I was more active with the oral language. I watch movies and listen to news in English more. (Student 5-F-Y4-E)

In most cases, these changes were linked to the transitions from one schooling level to another, such as from high school to university. Noticeably, there was a similarity in the reported strategies at high school, including those characterized by a repetitive and memorizational nature. Undertaking grammar exercises, memorizing grammar rules, rewriting new words were among the highly mentioned strategies in the high school experience of the interviewed students. As one student remarked:

From grade 6 to grade 12, most of what I did was to learn grammar and vocabulary out of context... Since I entered the university, I have been focusing more on listening and speaking. I have almost stopped learning grammar and vocabulary outside the classroom. (Student 2-F-Y2-E)

In other cases, student English proficiency levels, or the various learning environments were reported to determine the changes in English leaning strategy employment among the students.

I have changed my strategies quite often, depending on different stages of my learning. (Student 3-F-Y3-E)

I have been using different strategies since I started learning English. I guess it depends on my English levels and the learning environment at school. (Student 7-F-Y1-N)

Whether their dynamicity in LLS use is triggered by changing learning environments or learning needs, the findings suggest that learning is autonomous and independent. This active responsiveness to the changing contexts and environment is a very positive finding, which again challenges much of the literature about "passive" Vietnamese language learners. Contemporary researchers such as Gao (2006) also pointed to the dynamicity of LLS selection and use among Asian students under the influence of different learning contexts. The implication for teachers and educators is to find ways to further encourage, accommodate and enforce this conscious and selective adoption of LLSs among EFL students.

The third shared characteristic was the tendency to use technology-assisted strategies for the enhancement of English learning. Their preference for learning English through TV programs and online resources was evidenced in the following comments.

Every morning I spend 10 minutes to watch the IELTS preparation course on Australia network. I revise the learning points on this program and use Google to find out more details. For grammar, I will Google it on the internet before asking the help from teachers. (Student 8-M-Y2-N)

I love watching TV programs in English. Whenever I watch movies or cartoons, I repeat the lines of the characters and learn a lot from them, such as intonation. (Student 2-F-Y2-E)

At home, I usually listen to recordings of practice tests for TOEIC, or BBC news. I also watch videos on YouTube which are about my favourite topics. (Student 3-F-Y3-E)

Some students indicated that they knew how to take full advantage of being a “netizen” to maximize the opportunities for developing their English ability. Through their experiences, Internet-based strategies were demonstrated to open up a variety of pathways to achieving their desired goals English learning. Student 5, for example, proudly shared her own Internet-based strategies.

At the moment, I am an active member of an online forum ... It is actually a fan club where we exchange information about our idols. I often translate pieces of news about my idols into English and I learn a lot from that. Besides, being a member of this forum expands my network beyond Vietnam and I have friends who are from other countries... I think this is the best way for me to learn English and use English in the most meaningful and natural manner. (Student 5-F-Y4-E)

The current technologically-linked society may be at play in the shaping of this technology-based feature. Situating this finding in the socio-cultural perspective, individuals' strategic orientations to language learning can be influenced by the socio-environmental factors such as technology advancement. The data from this study confirms the contention that strategy use is framed not only by the immediate learning contexts but also by the larger social environment. It is highly recommended that further research be directed to the exploration and promotion of these technology-driven strategies whose potential for learning enhancement could greatly benefit language learners.

4 Conclusion

Language learning strategies, particularly within the tertiary environment, have moved beyond rote learning, grammar exercises and primary and high school approaches to language development. The current strategies and processes of language learning at the tertiary level are also dependant on many factors such as individual aptitude, perseverance, hard work, and the teacher and student's positive attitudes.

The study sought to investigate and evaluate the use of LLS among Vietnamese EFL students and staff in Vietnam. What was found was the attribution of English learning success to multiple elements, which is a positive perception. This deters the myth of the absolute power of any single factor in language learning. It has major implications for the teaching profession, in that the promotion of LLSs need to go hand in hand with other important tasks, such as the

stimulation of learning interests, the strengthening of learning determination, and the encouragement of learning efforts on the part of students.

There is also a need to move forward in language learning strategies that promotes student's ability to find what works for them, to overcome or drop old strategies and be flexible in trying new and unfamiliar strategies. It is also vital for teachers to be open to other strategies that have been found to work or developed by students themselves. These may include the use of technology and personal interests that promote the desire to learn and develop language acquisition beyond the classroom. Teaching language then moves beyond learning language and associated strategies, to motivating students to learn the skills and to equip students to develop positive strategies that can be used beyond tertiary education and enhance language development as a lifelong process.

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Appendix 1

Questions for Students

1. What are your views about the role of strategies in English learning?
2. Which of the following statements do you agree with more? Why?
 - a. Teachers have to teach students different learning strategies.
 - b. Students have to seek and experiment with different learning strategies by themselves.
3. Whenever you successfully complete a task for goal in learning English, what factors do you think are most likely to determine your achievements?
4. Have you ever received instructions/guidance from your teacher(s) on English learning strategies? If yes, can you provide more information on this matter?
5. How necessary is strategy instruction to you? Would you like to have strategy instruction imbedded or separated from your normal English course?
6. Please describe a situation when you had difficulties in adopting a new learning strategy.
7. Please indicate some strategies, if any, that you have stopped using because they are not effective.
8. Which of the following statements best describe you as a language learner? Please provide more information on this matter.
 - a. I have been using the same strategies since I started learning English
 - b. I have used different strategies as my English gets better.

Questions for Staff

1. What are your views about the role of strategies in English learning?
2. Which learning strategies do you think are most effective for the subject/course (Writing, Reading, or Speaking, etc.) that you mainly teach? In your view, what difficulties, if any, do students have in developing/adopting those learning strategies?
3. Please share with us your method(s) in teaching LLSs to your students. Could you indicate the resources or references for your instruction (personal experience, books, website, etc.)?
4. In your opinion, should there be a training course on English learning strategies at the University? Why or why not?
5. Do you have any suggestions on what teachers and the University should do to help students learn English better?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about English learning strategies and the current learning/teaching environment?