Gender-based Differences in Language Learning Strategies among Foreign Students Majoring in Myanmar Language at YUFL and MUFL

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Abstract

Myanmar Students are always enthusiastic to learn a foreign language. Both inside and outside classroom, they always find possible ways to improve their foreign language skills. Additionally, students have burning desire to communicate with the foreigners proficiently and accurately. However, some are not content with their foreign language proficiency. Therefore, they want to know what kind of strategies they should apply in learning a language. The objectives of this research were to study the language learning strategies employed by foreign students who study Myanmar Language at Yangon University of Foreign Languages (YUFL) and Mandalay University of Foreign Languages (MUFL) in the academic year 2019-2020, and to examine whether there is a relationship between language learning strategies and language improvement according to gender. This study applied quantitative method. The utilized questionnaire was from the most widely

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employed strategy scale the ESL/EFL version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990). Data analyses included the computation of descriptive statistics (means and frequencies). The findings of the study shed light that female learners employed more strategies than males. According to the replies of the participants, metacognitive strategies were highly employed whereas memory and compensation strategies were least used among them. Furthermore, one prominent finding highlighted in this research was that there was a significant difference according to the gender type. Strategy use reported by female participants indicated that they highly preferred metacognitive strategies whereas male participants showed their great preference on social strategies.

Introduction

In recent years, many studies in Myanmar have focused on foreign language learning. One of the factors in language learning which need to be taken into account is about language learning strategies. Studies conducted by scholars (Kato, 2005, 2009; Li, 2005; Oxford, 1989, 1990, 1996; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Wang, 2009, Cabaysa, 2010; Khmakhien, 2012; Tam, 2013, & Hassan, 2017) emphasized that language learning strategies are important factors in both teaching and learning process. According to O'Malley & Chamot (1990), the use of language learning strategies in foreign language learning is important because they can affect performance of the learners. Therefore, language learners need to master language learning strategies. In addition, language teachers should also make every effort to encourage the use of language learning strategies that can transform language classrooms into communicative practices. In Myanmar, recent studies have mainly dealt with language learning style among university students, however, not many investigations have been conducted about the importance of language learning strategies. Therefore, this paper addressed this gap by identifying language learning strategies

used by foreign students who study Myanmar language at YUFL and MUFL. With great interest in foreign or second language learning, this paper reported the preferred language learning strategies of 195 foreign students and showed the significant difference in the use of language learning strategies based on gender.

Literature Review

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of language learning strategies and their role in making learners more successful in their academic career. Oxford (1990) gave definition of language learning strategies as the tools taken by students to enhance their own learning. It was stated by Oxford (1990) that the appropriate use of language learning strategies helps to improve language proficiency and enhances self-confidence. As such, Oxford (1990) defined strategy as the plan, step or conscious action to achieve an objective. This strategy concept was then transformed into "learning strategies", which are defined as the operations applied by the learners to assist them in "the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). More specifically, these learning strategies are specific actions employed by the learners to make the "learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Cohen (1998) also described learning strategies as the processes that learners employ consciously to enhance the storage, retention, recall and application of knowledge in the language learning process.

Oxford (1990) has classified strategies into direct strategies and indirect strategies as shown in Figure 1.
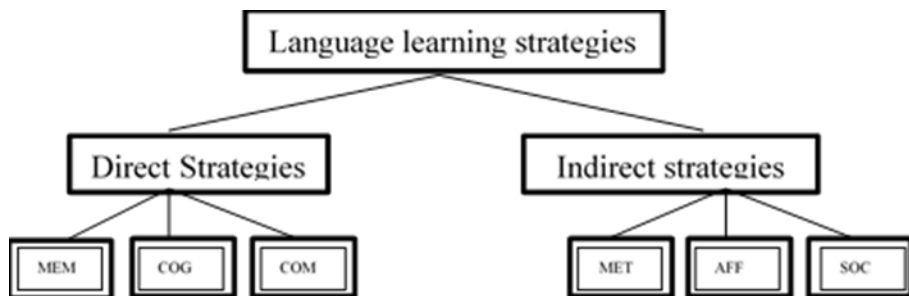
Figure 1. Strategy system by Oxford (1990, p.16).

Note. MEM= Memory   COG= Cognitive   COM= Compensation
MET= Metacognitive   AFF= Affective   SOC= Social.

According to Oxford (1990), as mentioned in the above figure, there are two main groups: direct strategies and indirect strategies. These two groups are subdivided into six sub-groups as memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. Memory, cognitive and compensation strategies are under the category of directive strategies. Meanwhile, indirect strategies are comprised of metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Direct strategies are defined as the strategies that involve mental process and directly influence the target language, whereas indirect strategies support and manage language without directly involving the target language" (Oxford 1990, p.14).

Table 1

Functions and Examples of Direct and Indirect Strategies.

Strategies		Function	Examples
Direct Strategies	Memory	Enable learners to store and retrieve new information of a new language	Grouping, imagery, and rhyming
	Cognitive	Enable learners to understand and produce new language	Reasoning, analyzing, summarizing, and generally practising

Table 1 (continued)

	Strategies	Function	Examples
	Compensation	Allow learners to use the language despite knowledge gaps	Guessing meaning in context, using synonyms and body gesture
Indirect Strategies	Metacognitive	Allow learners to evaluate their own language learning pattern and coordinate the learning process	Paying attention and self-evaluation
	Affective	Help learners gain control and regulate personal emotions, attitudes, and values	Anxiety reduction, self - encouragement, and self-reward
	Social	Allow users to interact with users	Asking questions and cooperating with native speakers

Studies on gender-based differences in language learning strategies

Many studies have investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and gender. According to Park & French (2011, p. 177), studies that investigate about gender differences in language learning strategies play an important role as men and women are considered to be different in both educational and occupational outcomes in general. An example of study conducted by Puteh, Zin, & Ismail (2016) confirmed that gender differences need to be given attention since "the difference between the girls and boys has been attributed to reading engagement among the students (p. 118). Therefore, gender differences are assumed to influence the choices of those learning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Gurian, 2001;

Severiens & Dam, 2005; Zhenhui, 2005; Logan & Johnston, 2009; Yilmaz, 2010; Park & French, 2011; Roohani & Zarei, 2013; Tam, 2013; Viriya & Sapsirin, 2014). Indika Liyanage & Brendan John Bartlett (2012) found that there were distinct preferences for males and females depending on the learning contexts in which specific strategies were reportedly being utilised Green and Oxford (1995) found in their study that females used more social and affective strategies. Kato (2005) obtained the same result in her study of Japanese EFL students. The results however were not always consistent. Ghadessy (1998) reported in the study of a group of university students in the Hong Kong Baptist University that there was a significant gender difference in five of the six categories of language learning strategies, except Memory Strategies. Mahmud & Nur (2018) explore language learning strategies of male and female students and discuss those strategies in relation to gender differences. Findings from the quantitative data showed that female students use more cognitive, compensation, and affective strategies while male students prefer using memory, metacognitive, and social strategies. According to Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008), no relationship between language learning strategies and gender was found in their study on Persian learners. Nisbet, Tindall, and Arroyo (2005) also obtained similar results in their study of 168 students from Hanan University in China. Therefore, Bremner 1999; Dreyer & Oxford 1996; Foong & Goh 1997; Green & Oxford 1995 recommended to further investigate the correlation between the variation in the use of language learning strategies and gender.

Research Objectives
1. To study the language learning strategies employed by foreign students who study Myanmar Language at YUFL and MUFL
2. To examine the relationship between language learning strategies and their language improvement based on gender

Methodology
In order to identify the language learning strategies, the questionnaire developed by the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990) was utilized. This questionnaire was widely employed due to

its high reliability and validity. The questionnaire consisted of 50 questions. The questionnaire was provided in three languages version; English, Myanmar and Chinese so that the participants would be able to respond the questions easily. The items in this instrument were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "always or almost always true of me" to "never or almost never true of me". The data obtained from the questionnaire furnished a composite score for each category of strategy.

1. Population and Samples

The study was conducted on 195 foreign students who study Myanmar language in YUFL and MUFL. These students were explained the purpose of this study before they were asked to sign the participation consent form. There were 45 beginning, 33 intermediate, and 117 advanced students. The age of the students ranged from 18 to 45. 139 of them were female and 56 of them were male students. The participants were from various counties (Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, India, Australia, France, and Germany). The participants reported that they have studied Myanmar language for total periods of time from at least one year to four years. Most of the students replied that they learn Myanmar language for their job expectations as interpreters and they are willing to invest in an oilfield because of Myanmar's booming economy.

Table 2
Demographic Description of Participants

	N	%
Myanmar proficiency		
Basic	45	23
Intermediate	33	17
Advanced	117	60
Gender		
Male	56	29
Female	139	71

Table 2 (continued)

	N	%
Nationality		
Korean	20	10
Chinese	82	42
Japanese	79	41
Thai	1	0.5
Vietnamese	4	1.5
Laos	5	3
Indian	1	0.5
Australian	1	0.5
French	1	0.5
German	1	0.5

The participants are engaged in some forms of language instruction in Myanmar for 20 to 25 hours weekly in their classroom, so they have the exposure of 8 to 10 months in total for study in each academic year. Students usually take advantage of language learning through the immersion programme of Myanmar Culture by participating in the extra curricula activities organized by the university.

2. Data Collection

First of all, the questionnaire was distributed to the students by the classroom teacher during a regular class period. The full descriptive instructions regarding to the procedures of administration were provided and the instructor discussed with the students before administration. The students were told that there were no right or wrong answers to any question and their confidentiality was secured and their response would be used for research purposes only. They were also asked to respond to each item based on an honest assessment of their language learning strategy use. In addition, they were informed that their participation would not affect their grades.

Furthermore, an Individual Background Questionnaire was distributed in order to gather demographic information about the students. The information included age, sex, nationality, language they usually speak in hostel during their stay in Myanmar, language they use at the university. Participants were also asked to rate their current level of Myanmar proficiency.

3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through the computation of descriptive statistics (means and frequencies) in order to compile demographic information of the participants and to get the overall result of the preferred strategies by the participants and finally to investigate the variation in the strategy use according to gender. The scale ranges (1) 'High Usage' (3.5-5.0), (2) 'Medium Usage' (2.5-3.4) and (3) 'Low Usage' (1.0-2.4) according to the model of Oxford (1990).

Results

The following figure shows the result of the preference of each language learning strategy item by the foreign learners majoring in Myanmar language at YUFL and MUFL.

Table 3

The Preferred Language Learning Strategies of the Participants

Strategy category	Strategy No.	Statement of Language Learning Strategies	Rank	Mean
High usage (M = 3.50 or above)				
Met	33	I try to find out how to be a better learner of Myanmar.	1	5.80
Cog	12	I practice the sounds of Myanmar.	2	5.57
Met	31	I notice my Myanmar mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	3	5.00

Table 3 (continued)

Strategy category	Strategy No.	Statement of Language Learning Strategies	Rank	Mean
Met	32	I pay attention when someone is speaking Myanmar.	4	4.89
Cog	11	I try to talk like native Myanmar speakers.	5	4.81
Met	34	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study Myanmar.	6	4.72
Met	30	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my Myanmar.	7	4.69
Cog	13	I use the Myanmar words I know in different ways.	8	4.69
Met	38	I think about my progress in learning Myanmar.	9	4.67
Cog	10	I say or write new Myanmar words several times.	10	4.58
Aff	39	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using Myanmar.	11	4.43
Aff	40	I encourage myself to speak Myanmar even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	12	4.36
Mem	9	I remember new Myanmar words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	13	4.33
Soc	46	I ask Myanmar speakers to correct me when I talk.	14	4.22
Met	35	I look for people I can talk to in Myanmar.	15	4.08
Soc	50	I try to learn about the culture of Myanmar speakers.	16	4.08
Com	29	If I can't think of a Myanmar word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	17	4.02

Table 3 (continued)

Strategy category	Strategy No.	Statement of Language Learning Strategies	Rank	Mean
Cog	21	I find the meaning of a Myanmar word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	18	4.02
Mem	4	I remember a new Myanmar word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	19	3.99
Soc	49	I ask questions in Myanmar.	20	3.95
Mem	2	I use new Myanmar words in a sentence so I can remember them.	21	3.93
Cog	14	I start conversations in the Myanmar.	22	3.93
Soc	48	I ask for help from Myanmar speakers.	23	3.91
Mem	3	I connect the sound of a new Myanmar word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	24	3.89
Soc	47	I practice Myanmar with other students.	25	3.81
Com	25	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in Myanmar, I use gestures.	26	3.71
Mem	6	I use flashcards to remember new Myanmar words.	27	3.68
Cog	20	I try to find patterns in Myanmar.	28	3.64
Aff	42	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using Myanmar.	29	3.58
Cog	22	I try not to translate word for word.	30	3.53

Table 3 (continued)

Strategy category	Strategy No.	Statement of Language Learning Strategies	Rank	Mean
Medium Usage (M = 2.5–3.4)				
Soc	45	If I do not understand something in Myanmar, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	31	3.47
Met	36	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in Myanmar.	32	3.41
Mem	7	I physically act out new Myanmar words.	33	3.38
Met	37	I have clear goals for improving my Myanmar skills.	34	3.30
Cog	16	I read for pleasure in Myanmar.	35	3.28
Cog	17	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in Myanmar.	36	3.27
Cog	19	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in Myanmar.	37	3.24
Mem	8	I review Myanmar lessons often.	38	3.19
Cog	15	I watch Myanmar language TV shows spoken in Myanmar or go to movies spoken in Myanmar.	39	3.12
Cog	23	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in Myanmar.	40	3.01
Aff	41	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in Myanmar.	41	2.99
Com	27	I read Myanmar without looking up every new word.	42	2.95
Com	26	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in Myanmar.	43	2.95

Table 3 (continued)

Strategy category	Strategy No.	Statement of Language Learning Strategies	Rank	Mean
Com	28	I try to guess what the other person will say next in Myanmar.	44	2.80
Cog	18	I first skim Myanmar passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	45	2.63
Com	24	To understand unfamiliar Myanmar words, I make guesses.	46	2.56
Aff	44	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning Myanmar.	47	2.46
Aff	43	I write down my feelings in a language learning dairy.	48	2.41
Low Usage (M = 2.4 or below)				
Mem	5	I use rhymes to remember new Myanmar words.	49	2.31
Mem	1	I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in the Myanmar.	50	0.71

Table 3 indicated the frequencies of all 50 items in the questionnaire. The mean score 30 items which were highly preferred by the participants was equal to or over 3.5. It indicated a high use of these items (Oxford 1990). The last two memory strategies had a mean score lower than 2.4, indicating little use of such strategies (Oxford 1990). The remaining 18 items had a mean between 2.4 to 3.4, indicating medium use of such strategies (Oxford 1990). Green & Oxford (1995) and Kato (2005) stated that the increased use of both direct and indirect strategies can make learners to have a high level of proficiency. Therefore, based on the results as shown in the above table, the participants in this study had high level of language proficiency.

The Use of Strategies by Gender

Oxford (1993) pointed out that gender can make a profound effect on the choice of language learning strategies in second language learning. Many studies have mentioned that females mostly perform better in second language learning than males. Therefore, language instructors should be aware of gender difference when they educate learners on language learning strategies. The result of the different use of language learning strategies by male and female students was recorded as follow:
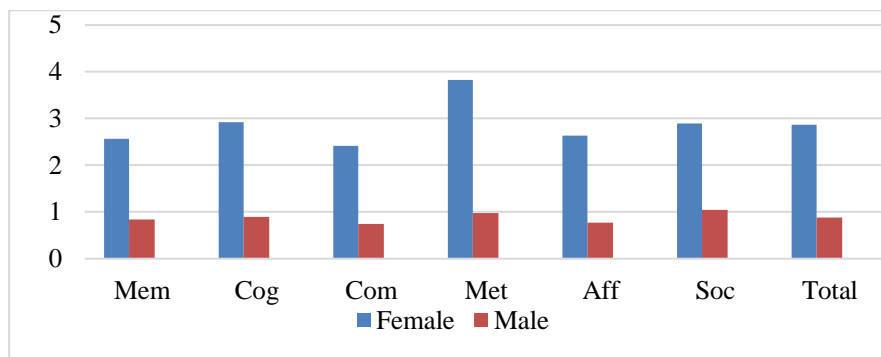

Figure 2. The different use of language learning strategies by male and female participants.

Obviously, as shown in the above figure, female students significantly employed more direct and indirect strategies compared to male students. Liyanage & Bartlett, 2012 and Platsidou & Sipitanou 2015 confirmed that females were more superior in the use of language learning strategies if compared to males. This could be because of the nature and personality of females. According to these researchers, females are very motivated to explore different ways of improving their language learning process compared to male students. Another significant difference found in this study was the use of social strategies which were ranked as the most preferred strategies by males, whereas metacognitive strategies were ranked as the most preferred by females. One similarity found in this study was in the use of compensation strategies that showed the least preference by both males and females.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the overall strategy use preferences of the sample. According to the replies of the participants, metacognitive strategies were the most employed strategies. It is revealed that participants were more aware of the importance metacognitive strategies as they could provide the necessary support to become more independent and successful learners in language learning especially in higher institutions contexts. Furthermore, metacognitive strategies are viewed as the more powerful strategies in assisting the learners to be more self-regulated in the learning process. The high use of metacognitive strategies is line with the findings from some Asian countries like Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan and other reports by Aliakbari & Hayatzadeh, 2008; Platsidou & Sipitanou, 2015; Tan & Kaur, 2015.

As Oxford (1990) pointed out that females tend to use more language learning strategies than males, this study found the same result. Strategy use reported by female participants in this study indicated that they had a high preference on metacognitive strategies since these strategies could help them to direct, organize, and plan their own language learning.

It was found out that male participants showed their great preference on social strategies. Male students replied that they preferred asking questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms. These strategies could help the learners work with others, understand the target language and culture as reported by Kiram (2014).

The similarity found in this study was in the use of compensation strategies. It was found out that compensation strategies were ranked as the lowest used by both male and female participants. According to Oxford (1990), compensation strategies enable students to make up for missing knowledge in the process of comprehending or producing the target language. One interesting point worth noting in this study is that all the participants are

reluctant to use comprehension strategies. The participants replied that they did not use gesture when they have difficulty to produce the language, and they did not like making up new words when they did not know the right ones. The lowest use of compensation is consistent with the finding of Shmais' (2004) study on EFL students from An-Najah National University. However, this result is slightly different from other studies done in Asian countries like China, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. For example, in the study of Subramaniam and Palanisamy (2014), compensation strategies were mostly used by the learners from private secondary schools in Malaysia. They have found that learners had to resort to compensation strategies because of their grammar and vocabulary deficiencies.

Recommendations

1. Implications

The data clearly indicated that the most preferred strategies by foreign students learning Myanmar language at YUFL and MUFL were metacognitive strategies as these strategies could be able to lead the learners to become more independent, self-directed and successful language learners. Male students showed great preference on social strategies but female students preferred using metacognitive strategies. Both of them did not like using compensation strategies. Since females were found to employ more strategies than males, future planning should be considered on how these indirect and direct strategies could be implemented effectively according to gender.

2. Further Studies

In addition, teachers are recommended to consciously integrate language learning strategies in foreign language teachings. It is hoped that the findings of this research may suggest some pedagogical implications. Therefore, applying language learning strategies in an appropriate and a flexible way can ensure to be more successful in language learning process as agreed by Fazeli (2012). Based on different contexts and the tasks given, if learners can be able to take control of their own language learning process by using

appropriate language learning strategies, this indirectly will lead the learners to have a better command of language proficiency. In conclusion, it is necessary for Myanmar students to understand the importance of using language learning strategies in the process of learning a language. Additionally, Myanmar students are encouraged to select language learning strategies that are most appropriate and relevant to their learning tasks. It is also essential to find opportunities to practise their foreign or second language and discover possible ways to use a wide range of strategies for the improvement of their language proficiency.

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