

# Language Learning Strategies Used by International Students in Learning the Thai Language

Nurizzi Rifqi Ferdian\*

## Abstract

This study investigated the language learning strategies used by international students who had different language backgrounds in learning the Thai language at Walailak University. This case study was administered after the students completed an intensive course on the Thai language conducted by the university. This class was solely for the 10 international students who wished to develop their Thai basic communication skill for the purpose of interacting with Thais around them. The qualitative data were collected from each participant in a one-to-one interview. The results from the 10 interviews showed that the students preferred to use three language learning strategies, namely 1) the use of L1 translation to the target language, 2) thinking in the target language, such as remembering specific words, sentences, and expressions and 3) practicing with the local people who can speak English.

**Keywords:** *language learning strategies, Walailak University international students, Thai language learning*

## Introduction

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\*School of Liberal Arts Walailak University

Thasala, Nakhon Si Thammarat rifqi.ferdian@zoho.com

The Thai language is necessary for international students living in Thais because Thais do not like to use English outside class. The Thai language may not look difficult if it is used in speaking but with a different set of the vowels and the alphabets, most of international students learning it admitted considerable difficulty in learning the language.

According to Oxford (2011), learning strategies are specific conscious steps used by language learners in order to achieve their language proficiency and competence. Appropriate learning strategies are practiced as tools to assist learners' learning process and improve self-confidence in learning the target language. It is therefore interesting to know what learning strategies the international students have been using in trying to cope with the all-Thai surroundings.

This paper investigated the language learning strategies used by international students from several countries who were doing their master's and doctor's degrees at Walailak University. Researches indicated that every learner has his/her own learning strategies but some learners are not fully aware of the strategies they use or the strategies that might be most beneficial for them (Chamot et al., 1996). Hakan, Aydin, & Bulent (2015) added that language learning strategies played very significant roles in facilitating understanding of language learning processes, helping learners to retrieve and store materials as well as assisting and accelerating their learning.

However, knowing the Thai language is not the priority for a chance of study success at Walailak University because the medium of instruction for these students is in English. They need the Thai language for their daily life routine. The purpose of this study is to identify major learning strategies the international students use, so the research question is; What are the international students' language learning strategies in learning the Thai language?

## Literature Review

### Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are defined as operations employed by language learners to acquire, retain, and retrieve their own learning. They are specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990). While O'Malley and Chamot (1990) viewed learning strategies as “the special thoughts or behaviors that learners use to help them comprehend, learn, and retain new information”, Holec (1981) argued that learning strategies can foster learners' autonomy in language learning.

Every learner has and uses different language learning strategies in performing the tasks and processing the new input they face. Wienstein, Husman and Dierking (2000) described language learning strategies as thoughts, behaviors, beliefs or feelings that help learners transfer new information to other environments. Thus, learning strategies are methods, techniques, behaviors and thoughts used by language learners to facilitate learning. These techniques facilitate the target language to be internalized, stored, recalled and used by the learners. In addition, language learning strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of language learning (Hakan et al., 2015). In other words, language learning strategies can provide language teachers and researchers about the valuable clues on how the learners deal with situations they face and select appropriate skills to understand, learn, or remember new input presented.

## **Studies about language learning strategies**

There have been many researches on learning strategies and most of them focused on what language learning strategies learners used, particularly in learning English as a foreign or second language (e.g., Rubin, 1987; Stern, 1975; Wenden, 1987). Some findings reveal that the effectiveness of using language learning strategies for successful language learners often results in improved proficiency or achievement overall or in specific skill areas (Oxford et al., 1993; Thompson & Rubin, 1993). Importantly, successful language learners tend to select strategies that work well together in a highly orchestrated way, tailored to the requirements of the language tasks (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). Thus, all learners use their preferred strategies since they know their own abilities and why they employ them in the learning process (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). McDonough (1995) and Nunan (2010) revealed that the most successful learners tend to use learning strategies that are appropriate to the materials, to the tasks, and to their own goals, needs, and stages of learning. Additionally, learning strategies can assist the students in fostering learning autonomy in language learning and guide them in promoting their own achievement in language proficiency (Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003). Therefore, learning strategies can help learners become efficient in learning and using a target language.

## **Research Methodology**

This study was conducted at Walailak University, Thailand. All the participants were international students from various countries and currently studying at this University. Those ten students volunteered to participate in the semi-structure interviews to reveal the strategies

they used in trying to learn the Thai language. The data were analyzed using content analysis. It is a research technique to identify the context of use (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). By studying the contexts of use, related theories can be analyzed. The steps were: breaking the data into manageable pieces, interpreting the data pieces, and labeling the emerging ideas with proper names which stand and represent the ideas contained in the data.

## FINDINGS

The results of this research are presented based on the research questions.

### Students' Perceptions on their Learning Strategies

All of the participants were asked what language learning strategies they employed in learning Thai. A few students responded that their first language helped them to absorb the target language. However, the rest could not use their first language to comprehend the Thai language. Details in actual words are shown in the following table.

Pseudonyms	Interview Excerpts
B1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thai language is quite complicated for me because I have to use English to learn Thai. I have to memorize and remember the words and sentences when I am in public because not all people can speak English. It is important to speak Thai here and I usually study it with my friends in my lab. Because they like to teach me and I need them to get some words so that I can use them when I am in a shop or canteen.</li> </ul>

Pseudonyms	Interview Excerpts
B2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speaking English in this university is not enough. I have to study Thai here because people do not want to speak English except in my lab. I also study Thai because I think it is useful for me, I used to write remember the common words in my book. So that, I use Thai with people around here and my friends can help check my language.</li> </ul>
B3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I use Thai when I need it because it is useful in this university. I only know English and it becomes the main language for me to communicate with Thais. I only want to study with my friends that can speak English. When I learn the Thai language and I get some new words, I like to write and remember them and practice again with them. Moreover, they are very keen to help and I usually write in my notebook, so that I can memorize, remember and practice those words.</li> </ul>
B4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actually, I am not interested in understanding the Thai language much because I can speak English with my friends. But it is also important for me because I need it to speak with people that cannot speak English. I learn Thai with my friends in the lab and they explain to me in English because only English that we can use to communicate. My friends really help me when I use Thai, I remember some words and then practice with them. They also correct me if I'm wrong and I think it is a good way to understand Thai language.</li> </ul>

Pseudonyms	Interview Excerpts
B5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I learn the Thai language with my friends and fortunately most of them can speak English. They explain and teach me Thai and correct me if I make some mistakes. It is good to learn the Thai language with people that can speak English. Another important thing is that we cannot rely on our friends only, but we also have to study by ourselves, such as memorizing a new vocabulary or expression. I learn a lot from my friends and Thai movies.</li> </ul>
IA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When I learn Thai, I like to connect the Thai language to my language because it is easier for me to understand, although sometimes I have to use English because they do not know my own language. I also do not forget to think and remember some important Thai which is commonly used in conversation. I have to think carefully because, if not, I cannot get what I want. When I do not know a word in Thai, I ask to my friends, but I prefer to ask to people that can speak English and understand me.</li> </ul>
IB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning Thai is quite easy for me because my language shares similarities with Thai; therefore, I can understand it very well. When I hang out with my friends, I usually ask them to teach me Thai and also correct my pronunciation. I also do not forget to write down some words and expressions in a note so that I can remember them.</li> </ul>

Pseudonyms	Interview Excerpts
IC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>My first language really helps me to understand Thai because there are some similarities, such as words and structure. Therefore, it is easy for me to know the Thai language more. Besides, I also have to improve my Thai by myself to understand it more by memorizing and remembering some important words and statements. Whenever I come across a new word, I will ask my friends to check whether my Thai language is correct or not.</li> </ul>
V1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I write some Thai words and memorize them. It is easy for me to understand Thai and practice my Thai because many people do not want to speak English with me. Therefore, speaking Thai at this university is important. My friends also like me if I speak Thai with them, I also ask them to correct my Thai language. They even prefer to teach me some words and expressions. For me, learning Thai is also easy because we have similar intonations, so I can speak Thai quite well.</li> </ul>
N1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whenever I study Thai, I only think about this language because we are surrounded by Thais. I never try to translate because it will be difficult for me. I prefer to think it in Thai and remember it. Although there are some similarities between Thai and my language, it is not enough for me. I like to ask my friends about the word that I want to know. After that, I try to convert it to my own language or English because I usually use English if I do not know Thai.</li> </ul>

## Strategies Employed by the Students

After analyzing the students' interview transcripts, the following categorizations were obtained.

### a. The Use of L1 Translation to the Target Language

From the participants' statements, the data showed that participants' L1 determined the difficulties of Thai language learning. Five students seemed to feel more comfortable since converting the words or sentences from their first language made it easy for them to communicate and understand the target language. In addition, they benefited from the similarities that the target language shared with the mother tongue. The rest, however, prefer to convert the Thai language to English since they cannot relate the target language to their L1. These findings showed that participants' first language played useful roles in identifying some parts of the target language. Thus, relating the target language with the mother tongue is a helpful way to learn Thai.

### b. Thinking in the Target Language

All the participants have same beliefs that memorizing and remembering some words and expressions of the target language are one of the best ways to comprehend it. They have applied a strategy used to store and restore information into memory and recall it when they need. Furthermore, the participants used this strategy after obtaining new vocabularies from their Thai friends or watching movies. They also practice the words with their friends directly for the purpose of accuracy. Therefore, the strategy to think the target use is

reasonable to apply since it can facilitate them to get more understanding of Thai language.

c. Practicing with the Local People Who Can Speak English

A strategy to ask and learn from a Thai native speaker is mostly used by the participants. It is used by them through working with others to know and improve their understanding of the target language. All of them believed that Thais who can speak English assist them in their Thai practice or even teach them new vocabularies or sentences. They prefer to learn and ask those who can speak English because they only have English as the introductory language when they speak. Additionally, Thais do not only help them to practice but also obtain a new understanding of the Thai language. Hence, applying this strategy, that is communicating with Thais who can speak English is a good way because English is the only language they can speak with. More importantly, they are surrounded by Thais and this environment can facilitate them to practically drill the Thai language.

## DISCUSSION

The ten international students have similar ideas about the learning strategies that work for them in comprehending the Thai language. From the findings above, the first strategy commonly used by the students is relating the participants' L1 to the target language. Five students implemented one language, namely English, to connect to the target language, while the rest are able to utilize both English and their native languages. Hence, students' L1 determined the strategy use of learning

Thai. This finding is supported by Nation (2001), who stated that L1 has a useful role in helping learners gain the knowledge needed to reach a higher level of L2 performance. Nation in his article also emphasized that learning would be facilitated if the students could convert the meaning of the first language to their target language. Relating L1 to the target language is a right way because L1 translations are usually clear, short and familiar (Keown 1993).

Another strategy they use is a strategy to store and restore information, that is, thinking in the target language by memorizing and remembering important words and expressions. The participants used this strategy after getting new vocabulary from their friends. Their strategies are reasonable since thinking in Thai (the target language) is a common strategy in learning a foreign language. As found by some scholars (Craik and Tulving, 1975), memorizing is greatly enhanced by relating new information to what one already knows, especially by putting new information in the context of learned knowledge that is semantically congruent with the new knowledge. Hence, the use of memory strategy in language learning is essential, since it has a function to recall and restore the information the students have had before.

The participants also apply a strategy to share and learn the Thai language with the local people who can speak English. It is implemented by the students through working with others to improve their target language. They believe that the local people can assist them by teaching them the target language. This particular strategy is often recommended when one learns a foreign language since practicing

with the native is an appropriate way to boost language understanding. This finding is consistent with Biyeam (1997); Wang and Rajprasit (2014) who believe that language learners have a desire to improve their communicative skills if they are provided with the opportunity of regular language practice with the native speakers of that language. Moreover, Kayi (2006) asserted that the enhancement of communicative skills should be based on real life situations and practice activities provided to the students to prepare them for real life communication with foreigners. Therefore, the all-Thai environment has a crucial role for international students in learning Thai.

## **Conclusion**

The study has presented evidence of various strategies used by International students at Walailak University that help them to learn Thai. The students who relate their L1 to the target language can employ a variety of language learning strategies when learning Thai. It also summarizes that the use of memory strategy in learning Thai language will be better if it is integrated to social strategy since it is not enough for the students to solely remember without practicing, as rehearsaling with the local people.

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