

Styles and Strategies of a Vietnamese and an Indonesian Student in Learning English

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Abstract: The present paper is a report of an investigation on the styles and strategies used by a Vietnamese and an Indonesian student in learning English. The subjects were a Vietnamese who was taking English bridging courses and an Indonesian formally taking ELICOS at Curtin University of Technology, W.A. The objective of the study was to find out what makes up the styles and strategies of the two subjects. The result of the study was projected to provide bases for ELT practices, particularly, regarding the styles and strategies of Asian ESL/EFL learners, in general, and Vietnamese and Indonesian students, in particular.

Keywords: learning English, Vietnamese student, Indonesian student.

TESL/TEFL has always been concerned with the factors involved in it such as the goals (institutional, individual), syllabus, material selection, teachers and learners. Relating to the last point, learners' styles and strategies in learning have been the concern of some experts. Reid (1987) defines learning styles as a pervasive quality in the learning strategies or the learning behaviour of an individual. Four basic styles Reid has identified include visual learning, auditory learning, kinaesthetic learning, and tactile learning. Ehrman and Oxford (1990) consider styles as preferred

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of habitual patterns of mental functioning and dealing with new information, and strategies as the often conscious steps or behaviours used by learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information. In terms of language learning, Green and Oxford (1995) defines strategies as a specific actions or techniques that students use, often intentionally, to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. Huggeng (1997) defines learning strategies as observable actions done by the learners, consciously or subconsciously, in participating in a formal classroom interaction. Chamot et al (1999) define learning strategies as procedures or techniques that learners can use to facilitate a learning task. For the sake of practicality, in this study, the term style was defined as a category of a tendency of actions preferred by the subjects in coping with English courses. These actions, which constitute the strategies, are those done and reported by the subjects.

Since the 1970s, interest in the behaviours of language learners has increased (Naiman et al, 1996) and studies in order to throw light on several aspects of the learners such as aptitude, motivation, beliefs, styles, strategies, and so forth have been done, particularly, in relation to the learners' different linguistic and socio-cultural background (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Fiocco, 1998; Jones, 1995; Kember, 1996, 2000; Littlewood, 2000; Parry, 1996; Reid, 1987; Spratt, 2001). In other words, the studies have dealt with the individual or psychological properties (needs, motives, desires, and purposes) in relation to the backdrop of the institutional representations (ideas, beliefs, customs, and forms of organization).

It has been widely known that international students, particularly those from Asian countries who study at Australian universities, frequently demonstrate cultural-specific learning styles and strategies which often bring about academic problems (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984 & 1997). These problems are frequently due to the students' styles and strategies of learning (academic performance, in general), which do not meet the expectation of the teaching staff of the Australian universities. Whilst the Australian educative staff embrace the so-called Western (Socratic) academic culture, the Asian students are believed to have Confucian academic culture (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984 & 1997; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). Flowerdew and Miller (1995) also note such a kind of difference in that Judaeo-Christian is attributed to the Western culture and Confucian to the East

Asian culture. Under these 'loaded' terms, the Western students are said to embrace the following points: lecturer is valued as a guide and facilitator; lecturer is open to challenge; student is motivated by desire for individual development; positive value is placed on self-expression of ideas; and emphasis is on individual development and creativity in learning. The East Asian students are believed to have the following concepts: respect for the authority of lecturer is high; lecturer should not be questioned; student is motivated by family and pressure to excel; positive value is placed on effacement and silence; and emphasis is on group orientation to learning.

Speculating the rigour of the dichotomy, some have done studies which, to some degree, turned out to disprove the idea. Littlewood (2000), for example, found that there was less difference between Asian and European students in their attitudes to learning than between individuals within each country. Reid (1987) found that Indonesian students preferred individual learning as opposed to the idea in the dichotomy. Fiocco (1998) found that, in general, Indonesian students preferred to learn in groups, while Singaporean students preferred individual work.

Some other research on Asian students have dealt with some other aspects. Regarding the relationship between cultural membership and individual language learning behaviour, Parry (1996), specifically comparing the reading strategies of secondary school students in northern Nigeria and university graduates in China, came up with a finding that the Nigerian students preferred top-down methods of solving comprehension problems and the Chinese students demonstrated bottom-up methods. Cheng (in Scarcella, 1990), reported that many Asian students learned through observation and modelling. Jones (1995), in a study comparing Vietnamese and Australian students using pragmatic analysis, found out that there were no wide differences in managing conversation in English between the two groups. Mochizuki (1999), in a study to find Japanese university students' strategies in language learning, found out that: Japanese university students used compensation strategies the most often and affective ones the least; the more proficient students used cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies more frequently than the less proficient students; the factors which influenced the choice of strategies were major, motivation, enjoyment of English learning and gender.

Indeed, a few studies have been conducted specifically on Vietnamese students. However, these studies have been on the aspects not related to Vietnamese students' styles and strategies in learning English. Jones (1995) compared the pragmatic performance of Vietnamese and Australian students, Helms-Park (2001) explored the acquisition of English causatives by speakers of Hindi-Urdu and Vietnamese, Hinkel (1995) compared the use of English modal verbs of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Native Americans, Pham (1998) investigated the language attitudes of the older and younger generations of Vietnamese bilingual adults in Melbourne, and Ninnes (1996) studied factors influential to the language maintenance among a cohort of secondary school students of Vietnamese background in Adelaide.

Unlike the case on Vietnamese, a little amount of research has been done to explore the characteristics of Indonesian students in learning. A study by Reid (1987), for example, demonstrated that Indonesians tended to resemble native English speakers' styles in that they preferred auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles as major choices, did not prefer group learning, and demonstrated visual, tactile, and individual learning as minor styles. Another study by Fiocco (1998), found that Indonesian students preferred a kinaesthetic learning style and, in general, they enjoyed group work. This, preference for group work, contradicts Reid's finding. Fiocco also found that Indonesian students felt inferior towards Singaporean students and had difficulties in expressing critical thought. However, she points that there was a possibility that such a characteristic changes and the students also could express critical evaluation. Sugeng (1997), specifically investigated a learning strategy profile of Indonesian elementary school students, found that cognitive strategy was used the most in percentage, affective the second, social strategy the third, and meta-cognitive the least.

Yet, the studies above, dealing with both Vietnamese and Indonesian subjects, have not specifically touched upon the styles and strategies in learning English. Therefore, this study was focussed on the styles and strategies of a Vietnamese and an Indonesian student, who already had completed their first degree in their home country and were formally still undertaking English language courses. It means that the study took subjects different in their specification from the previous studies.

METHODS

The Vietnamese is male and the Indonesian is female. Both of the subjects came to Perth in order to study at Curtin University by mid January, 2002. Both of the subjects had completed a first degree prior to their arrival at Curtin University. The Vietnamese had completed a Bachelor in Mechanical Engineering and the Indonesian a Bachelor in Economics. The Vietnamese was taking English bridging courses and the Indonesian was taking ELICOS. Both of the subjects had spent most of their life in their home country. The Vietnamese had the experience of learning SL/FL of Russian, Japanese, and English, but he speaks Vietnamese, Japanese and English. The Indonesian had experienced the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language. The Vietnamese had learned Japanese in Japan, English in an auto-didactic way, and Russian at secondary school in Vietnam. The Indonesian had learned Mandarin and English at private institutions in Indonesia. The Vietnamese had learned the SL/FL other than English for over 4 years and English for over 5 years. The Indonesian had learned Mandarin and has learned English for over 5 years. Both of the subjects expect to meet the English language proficiency requirement for a Master's degree in their respective specialisation at Curtin University.

The data were collected by means of three kinds of instrument, i.e., form used for eliciting personal details and language background, interview and R. Oxford's (1989) SILL, version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) (in Oxford, 1990). In the interview, the writer used mostly open-ended questions. The interview with the Vietnamese subject was conducted in English, for English is the only language both the writer and the subject share. The interview with the Indonesian subject was done in Indonesian. This was due to the subject's choice. The subjects did not feel confident enough to use English for the interview. The interview with both subjects was tape-recorded, transcribed, and analysed. Translation into English of the Indonesian transcript was conducted prior to the analysis. The R. Oxford's SILL was given to the subjects who then did the tasks required for SILL completion immediately in the presence of the investigator.

RESULTS

The following table shows the use of learning strategies by the Vietnamese and Indonesian students in learning English.

Table 1 Vietnamese and Indonesian's Strategies in Learning English

	Strategies	Vietnamese	Indonesian
a.	Memory	2.7	3.3
b.	Cognitive	4.8	4.7
c.	Compensation	2.2	1.3
d.	Metacognitive	4.1	3.4
e.	Affective	1.3	2.5
f.	Social	2.2	2.8

To read the table easier, the interpretation of the figures need to be presented in terms of the level of the use of the strategies. The following is the level of the use of the strategies:

- High : - always or almost always used : 4.5-5.0
- usually used : 3.5-4.4
- Medium : - sometimes used : 2.5-3.4
- Low : - generally not used : 1.5-2.4
- never or almost never used : 1.0-1.4

Vietnamese

He mostly uses cognitive strategies (4.8) followed with meta-cognitive strategies (4.1) and memory strategies (2.7). Compensation strategies and social strategies are employed equally (2.2). The least used are affective strategies (1.3). Subjects' performance on SILL

In applying cognitive strategies, he tries to check new vocabulary in the dictionary and then write and apply it in essays. He then continues by rereading which takes several times. He also listens to Australian radio and television to improve his listening skill. In addition to that, he also reads books. His use of cognitive strategies is made more complete by how he thinks; he tries to think in English and tries to avoid translating his thought into his mother tongue.

To apply the meta-cognitive strategies, he frequently pays attention to his mistakes in using English. He makes plan for his English study. He also makes friend so as to create the opportunity to use English as much as possible.

Reviewing English lessons often is one of his uses of the memory strategies. When confronted with new vocabulary, he tries to understand it through context. He also tries to find synonyms. He is also fond of making guesses from context, which constitutes his use of compensation strategies.

Social strategies are often applied by learning English culture, asking questions to and asking for help from English speakers, and practicing English with other students.

Although he is worried about making mistakes in speaking English, he tries to encourage himself to use English as much as possible. This displays his use of affective strategies.

Indonesian

The three mostly employed strategies by the Indonesian are the same as those of the Vietnamese. They are cognitive strategies (4.7), meta-cognitive strategies (3.4), and memory strategies (3.3). Social and affective strategies are used moderately (2.8 and 2.5 respectively). Unlike the Vietnamese who uses affective strategies the least, she employs compensation strategies the least (1.3), far below the other types of strategies.

She applies the cognitive strategies by practicing the English sounds and watching TV and movies in English. Besides that, she usually uses the English words in different ways, reads English books for pleasure, and writes notes in English. When she reads a newspaper, she skims first and then rereads it carefully.

Having a clear objective in learning English and always trying to find people to talk to in English are the marked efforts which demonstrate her use of meta-cognitive strategies. In addition to that, she is concerned with her progress; she is worried about her listening skill. She usually looks for opportunity to read English materials as much as possible; she frequently spends her time at the library studying.

Her use of memory strategies are in the forms of using new English words in a sentence, recalling the new words by creating mental pictures related to the words, and making list of words. She also tries to remember words by the use of rhymes and the location of the words.

In applying the social strategies, she tries to learn English culture, spend her time frequently with friends other than Indonesians. She also tries to use English in real context, for example in ordering meals. This

also works to lessen the tense she usually experiences in using English, which means that she applies affective strategies. This goes with her self-encouragement to use English as much as possible. However, she rarely tries to relax when she finds herself anxious.

She seldom makes guesses to understand unfamiliar words; she usually directly consult a dictionary. This is why she scores low in the use of compensation strategies.

DISCUSSIONS

Discussions

The above description shows the styles and strategies of the students drawn from the interview and SILL. It is apparent, however, that this knowledge about the styles and strategies has not give a clear idea about the quality of the subjects in terms of their English learning; it is still foggy whether the subjects are good language learners or not. It is an academic concern to know if students are good or poor, for this knowledge is the basis for the learners' betterment. Therefore, it is desirable to see the subjects' styles and strategies on the basis of the criteria of good language learners, for example those proposed by Stern (in Naiman et al, 1996) and Waters and Waters (1992). We, however, should be cautious about Stern's terminologies in this case, for they might be confused with other experts'. Apparently, both of the subjects meet some criteria of Stern's *a good language learner*, i.e. planning strategy (positive learning strategy), active strategy (an active approach to the learning task), semantic strategy (constant searching for meaning), practice strategy (willingness to practice), communication strategy (willingness to use the language in real communication), emphatic strategy (a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and its speakers) and monitoring strategy (self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use). Particularly, the Vietnamese shows that he employs internalisation strategy (learning to think in the target language); however, it is still doubtful whether the Indonesian develops such an internalisation strategy. It is also relatively vague whether the two subjects meet other Stern's criteria of formal strategy (technical know-how of how to tackle a language) and experimental strategy (a methodical but flexible approach). It is also unclear yet if the two subjects totally meet Waters and Waters' (1992) criteria for successful students, i.e.: have a high degree of self-awareness; are good at critical questioning;

tend to have an 'adult' approach to relations with their teachers; think clearly and logically; are self-confident; impose their own framework on study data; have a positive attitude to their studies; are willing and able to teach themselves; and intelligent. It seems that, to some extent, the Vietnamese, particularly, shows positive attitude towards critical thinking. However, there is no evidence that the Indonesian has the same attitude; she only reported that she is positive towards the friendly way of the English teacher at Curtin University. Apparently, unlike the Indonesian, the Vietnamese is more self-confident, which, to some extent, meet Waters and Waters' criteria.

In general, this investigation yielded a similar finding to Fiocco's (1998) in that the subjects have been undergoing a shift; both have been adjusting to the Australian academic culture and both have a positive attitude towards the Australian academic culture. The difference is that while the Vietnamese seemed to be more preoccupied with the possibility of challenging teacher's opinion, the Indonesian is more impressed by the relaxed, friendly, warm atmosphere created by the English teacher, which is different from that in her home country.

This suggests that the dichotomy as notified by some like Flowerdew and Miller (1995) and Kember (2000) should be seen as a signpost which gives a preliminary idea of the characteristics of Asian students. The dichotomy should not be seen as a 'capital punishment' on the Asian students, for they are living organisms dynamic in nature. It means that, to some degree, the dichotomy is true as reported by the subjects. For example, when they were in their home country, they could not challenge the authority of the teachers. The Indonesian, especially, reported that she never spoke in the classroom; the teacher was everything. However, it should be seen as an elastic categorisation.

This study, however, was quite limited in terms of the number of the subject and aspects investigated. It is not wise to apply transferability, let alone generalisation, of the findings to a broad range of population. It is more appropriate for case study of particular subjects. Therefore, a larger number of subjects as well as aspects explored need conducting. Also, this study was not equipped with classroom as well as daily performance observation of the subjects. It did not either look at the subjects' academic performance in terms of English proficiency. This means that such aspects also need juxtaposing and evaluating.

Pedagogical Implications

As both of the subjects scored meta-cognitive strategies lower than the cognitive ones, the subjects need training which sensitises the use of the meta-cognitive strategies, which some experts have proved substantial in English language learning (see Chamot et al, 1999; Waters & Waters, 1992; Nunan, 1997). Particular training also needs to be conducted concerning some other kinds of strategies, i.e., social, affective, and compensation strategies which both of the subjects scored low. These strategies go hand in hand with Stern's criteria for a good language learner. Yet, it is not suggested here that language teachers then be only busy with the strategies training and overlook domain-specific strategies, i.e., strategies specific to language (Kaplan, 1998). After all, language teaching includes general strategies and domain-specific strategies, which should be carried out in balance, in accordance with the situation.

This study also signifies the idea that an English teacher needs to explore students' academic, linguistic, and cultural background so that the expectation gap, particularly between the Asian students and the Australian teachers, could be managed smoothly and nicely. Besides that, individualised instructions which favour the individual student's styles and strategies of learning are worth considering. However, individual instructions here do not mean that the students are blocked from new academic culture which proves to be fruitful. It is also worth noting that individualised instructions often go well at the expense of the teacher's energy; therefore, varying instructions which do not 'bog down' the students, like those having Confucian tradition, are worthwhile. In other words, the norm criterion mode of teaching and assessing need to be equipped with the willingness on the part of the teacher to have individual attention (probably, clinical supervision) to the students. It is also revealed that the Indonesian subject changed some of her strategies before the end of the first term of her ELICOS. It means that adjusting to a new academic culture and learning styles need time. Therefore, it is advisable for the teachers to grant time to the students for such an adjustment.

CONCLUSION

Both the Vietnamese and the Indonesian subjects have positive attitudes towards Australian academic culture. Both apply cognitive strategies more than meta-cognitive strategies. Since the meta-cognitive strate-

gies have been proved substantial in language learning, both of the subjects need to be trained with these strategies. Individualised instructions which require more teacher's understanding of students' individual characteristics is worth applying.

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