



## กลยุทธ์ทางภาษาที่ใช้ในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษกับชาวต่างชาติ : กรณีศึกษาของนักศึกษาชาวเวียดนาม

### Language Strategies Used to Communicate in English with Foreigners : A Case Study of Vietnamese Students

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#### Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating language strategies used by Vietnamese students in to communication in English with foreigners. The informants were 10 Vietnamese students attending the international practicum at Rajamangala Universities of Technology Isan, Kalasin Campus. A semi-structured interview was employed for data collection. The obtained data were validated and analyzed qualitatively. Based on the role of the language learners when engaged in a conversation as the message sender and as the message receiver, the results showed two main categories and two subcategories of strategies for dealing with the situation of English communication with foreigners including: 1) strategies for transmitting a message to the interlocutor as the message sender together with two subcategories namely 1.1) continuous interaction strategies for transmitting a message and 1.2) discontinuous interaction strategies for transmitting a message, and 2) strategies for understanding the message as the message receiver.

**Keywords:** Language Strategies, English Communication, Vietnamese students, transmitting message, understanding message

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## บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาในครั้งนี้มุ่งการศึกษากลยุทธ์ทางภาษาที่นักศึกษาชาวเวียดนามใช้ในการสนทนาภาษาอังกฤษกับชาวต่างชาติ กลุ่มผู้ให้ข้อมูลประกอบด้วยนักศึกษาชาวเวียดนามที่เข้าร่วมโครงการการฝึกงานระหว่างประเทศ ณ มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลอีสาน วิทยาเขตกาฬสินธุ์ จำนวน 10 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลคือแบบสัมภาษณ์กึ่งโครงสร้าง ข้อมูลที่ได้ถูกวิเคราะห์แบบเชิงคุณภาพ ในบทบาทของนักศึกษาเมื่อต้องสื่อสารกับชาวต่างชาติทั้งในบทบาทของผู้ส่งสารและผู้รับสาร ผลการศึกษาชี้ให้เห็นว่า นักศึกษาชาวเวียดนามใช้กลยุทธ์ทางภาษาอยู่ 2 กลุ่มหลักและ 2 กลุ่มย่อย และคือ 1 กลยุทธ์ที่ใช้ในการส่งสารแก่คู่สนทนาในฐานะผู้ส่งสาร และมีกลยุทธ์ย่อยคือ 1.1 กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารแบบต่อเนื่องและ 1.2 กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารแบบไม่ต่อเนื่อง และ 2 กลยุทธ์ที่ใช้ในการทำความเข้าใจสารในฐานะของผู้รับสาร

**คำสำคัญ :** กลยุทธ์ทางภาษา, ภาษาอังกฤษสื่อสาร, นักศึกษาชาวเวียดนาม, การส่งสาร, การรับสาร

## Introduction

In an integrated world, especially the combination of ten nations in the Southeast Asia to be the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in the 2015 which aims to cooperatively promote the development in various aspects such as economics, investment, public health, education, transportation, military, and tourism, the trend of students exchange becomes more important than in previous time periods. Moreover, English is established as a working language of the ASEAN Community which inspires many member

countries to improve the English skills of their citizens. For educational context, students exchange program is the activities that used by many educational institutions to improve their students' English ability. Student exchange programs aim to elevate global and cultural awareness, encourage independent study interests, improve foreign language skills among participants and enhance inter-cultural communication competencies that are very important parts of today's education (Ceseviciute and Minkute, 2002). However, most EFL students in the



context of English as a foreign language have a problem in communicating efficiently specifically listening and speaking skills comparing to reading and writing skills (Ya-ni, 2007). However, Zheng (2004) suggests that communication strategies are feasible and to some extent inevitable for language learners to use in their oral communication. They can also improve the confidence, flexibility, and effectiveness in oral communication of the language learners. According to Dörnyei (1995), communication strategies can help learners obtain English language practice. Furthermore, they may help learners remain in a conversation and so provide the learners with more input, more opportunities for checking and validating their hypotheses, and therefore, more chances to develop their inter-language system (Mariani, 2010).

In 2012, the vice – president of Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Kalasin Campus and the rector of Hue University of Foreign Languages had mutually agreed to sign the Memorandum of

Understanding (MOU) to build up the academic cooperation in terms of students exchange, faculty staff exchange, cultural exchange, course development, and joint research project. During July 1 – 31, 2013, ten students from Hue University of Foreign Languages came to take the International Practicum Program at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Kalasin Campus. The researcher was assigned to be the coordinator of this program. From the informal observation, it seems that the ten Vietnamese students communicated well in English. When facing problems while speaking English, they tried to solve them and make the communication go smoothly.

According the statements mentioned earlier, they encourage the researcher to find out what is behind the smooth communication of them and what helps them communicate well. This made the research believes that the language learning strategies are the key of success of their English communication.



## Theoretical Background

### English Teaching in Vietnam

In Vietnam, according to Think (1999), the teaching and learning of English is very limited. English was first taught about twenty years ago. The importance of English in Vietnam was recognized when Vietnam adopted its Doi Moi policy in 1986. English language learning and teaching in Vietnam nowadays is considered as the key to open the world of academic and economic development. As a result, English has been the foreign language of the first choice for almost all learners. English is a compulsory subject from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in primary schools to tertiary level (MOET, 2010). It is also one of the four foreign languages (English, French, Russian, and Chinese) in the entrance examination for the higher education level.

### Language Learning strategies

Language learning strategy has been proved by many researchers that it was the key of the success of language learning. Nowadays, researchers such as O'Malley (1987), Oxford (1990), Wenden (1991), Cohen (1998) and

Chamot (2001) have suggested that learners might be able to learn language more effectively by the use of language learning strategies (Griffiths, 2003). Since the pioneering work on language learning strategies were carried out in the mid-seventies (for instance by Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975), there has been an awareness that they have the potential to be "an extremely powerful learning tool" (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo, 1985, p.43).

According to Oxford (1990), she has defined the language learning strategies as the specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations. In this regard, she also classified language learning strategies into two categories which are "Direct Strategies and Indirect Strategies. She also defined the Direct Strategies as the language learning strategies that directly involve the target language. All direct strategies require mental processing of the language.



The three groups of direct strategies are as follows:

1. Memory strategies – techniques specifically tailored to help the learner store new information in their memory and retrieve it later on, e. g. placing new words in context, using keywords and representing sounds in memory, etc.

2. Cognitive strategies – skills that allow students to better comprehend and produce language in different ways, e.g. note-taking, repetition, summarizing text, etc.

3. Compensation strategies – behaviors used to compensate and help them employ the language, e.g. guessing while listening or reading, or using synonyms or paraphrasing while speaking or writing.

As opposed to Direct Strategies, “Indirect Strategies provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy, and other means.” The three aspects of indirect strategies are as follows:

4. Metacognitive strategies – behaviors used for arranging,

planning and evaluating one’s learning, e.g. overviewing and linking with already known material.

5. Affective strategies – techniques which regulate emotional behaviors and motivation, e.g. using relaxation techniques, singing songs in a target language to lower one’s anxiety, etc.

6. Social strategies – actions allowing better learner interaction with other people in the language learning process, e.g. asking questions, cooperating with peers, and developing empathy towards target language speaking people, etc.

### **Communication Strategies**

Communication strategies were defined differently by many researchers such as Tarone (1980, p.420; 1983, p.65) defines communication strategies as “a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared.” Correspondingly, Canale (1983, p.10) explains communication strategies as “verbal and non-verbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in



communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more other areas of communicative competence, and to enhance the effectiveness of communication.” In addition, Canale (1983) and Bygate (2000) argue that communication strategies are used not only to cope with any language-related difficulties, but also to enhance the effectiveness of communication even if there is no problem or difficulty occurred during an oral communication. Consequently, it can be concluded that communication strategies are regularly used to deal with the difficulties in communication and to improve the quality of communication as well.

### **Types of Communication Strategies**

Communication strategies are generally used by the L2 learners when the linguistic or sociolinguistic knowledge of a message is unavailable. Two types of CSs are available for them to use: 1) “achievement” strategies (Færch & Kasper, 1983; Willems, 1987) or “compensatory” strategies (Poulisse,

1987) and 2) “avoidance” strategies (Tarone, 1980; Dörnyei, 1995) or “reduction” strategies (Færch & Kasper, 1983; Dörnyei, 1995). Language learners employ the achievement or compensatory strategies such as repetition, language switch, paraphrase or circumlocution, paralinguistic devices, or appeal for help in an attempt or many attempts to cope with the communication difficulties directly by using alternatives in order to send message. On the other hand, the learners may rely on the avoidance or reduction strategies, such as topic avoidance or message abandonment to change, replace, or reduce the content of the intended message so that they keep the message within their communicative resources.

The review of related literatures about the study of language strategies conducted with Vietnamese learners tended to be the only exploration of overall strategies frequently employed by Vietnamese learners introduced by Oxford (1990). Some other research solely explored the strategies employed by Vietnamese students in learning the English language, and



explored on how these strategies affected the students' language achievement, e.g. Huyen (2004) and Hien (2007). Regarding Minh and Intarapresert (2012), a few researches on language learning strategies were conducted with Vietnamese students learning English as a foreign language and concentrated on how to become successful learners by employing language strategies and a little researches focuses on variables affecting the choice of language learning strategies such as gender, major fields of study as in Khuong (1997); Hang (2008). Moreover, the researchers could not find the research which has been conducted to explore strategies employed by the Vietnamese students to deal with the situation of English communication with foreigners exclusively. As mentioned earlier, this, therefore, encourages the researcher to explore the language learning strategies employed by the Vietnamese students to cope with the situation of communication with foreigners in English.

## Research Objectives

This study aimed at investigating how English major Vietnamese students deal with the situation of English communication with foreigners.

## Research Methodology

### Informants

The informants of this study were 10 3<sup>rd</sup> year English major Vietnamese students who attended the international practicum program at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Kalasin Campus during 1<sup>st</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2013. They were selected through the purposive sampling method on the basis of convenience and availability.

### Research Instrument

The research instrument used in this study was the semi – structured interview created by the researcher from the analysis of literature review. The interview questions were mainly designed to ask how the Vietnamese students dealt with the situation of English communication with foreigners. Further, they were asked if they



encountered any problems and how they solved the problems. The content of the questions emerged from the related literature review, available research works in the field of language learning strategies, and through the researcher's personal experience. Before the questions in the semi - structured interview was implemented, they were piloted with other group of Vietnamese students joining in the students exchange program at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Kalasin Campus in order to see whether the questions are proper and clear or they need to be revised in terms of wording, sentence sequencing, timing, or other technical problems that might appear during the data collection. Then, the interview questions were revised according to the problems found so that the researcher could use them to elicit as much information as possible about strategies for coping with oral communication problems.

#### **Data Collection**

The data triangulation technique was implemented in this study; the data were gathered at the different time. The data were gathered via the

one-on-one semi-structured interviews for two times, the third week and the last week of staying at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Kalasin Campus. Denscombe (2003) suggested that setting a relaxed atmosphere in which the students feel free to open up on the topic is necessary and Measor (1985) indicated that one way to build a good relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees is to ask their names or nick names. The researcher, therefore, builds the rapport with all informants before the interview begins.

As the coordinator of the international practicum program, it was a good opportunity for the researcher to do so. This made the informants willingly expose the strategies they always used to deal with the problems occurred in the situation of English communication with foreigners while the interview. In the interview, the researcher administered the interview procedures as suggested by Robson (2002) that the researchers should listen to the students more than speak; put questions in a straightforward, clear



and non-threatening way to the students; don't ask leading questions; look satisfied with students' responses, and make students feel that they are understandable and easy to talk to. However, some students seemed to be worried and anxious because they might think that they would be interviewed one to one in English. The researchers had to ensure them the interview focuses on content more than language used and this seemed to make them feel more comfortable and confident during the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

After having finished the interview process, the researcher started to discover language strategies employed by Vietnamese students in the situation of English communication with foreigners. The researcher analyzed the data obtained from the interviews from two times through the three phases of the coding technique (Cresswell, 2002) including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding by doing the following steps:

1. The researcher carefully read through the interview data regarding

language strategies reported by 10 Vietnamese students attending the international practicum program at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Kalasin Campus.

2. Each language behavior or strategy which was consistent and proper in the present investigation was accordingly identified, and the codes were then given to such behavior and strategy (Open Coding). The researcher had to be very careful at this step to ensure that every single reported strategy or behavior was identified accurately and properly.

3. The researcher started to find out the similarities and differences among the reported statements from the list of every single reported language strategy. It was found that the informants produced altogether 99 statements about language behaviors or strategies in the situation of English communication. The researchers started to think how to group and categorize these statements for the next step.

4. The researcher had to group these 99 statements according to the similarities of the context or situation in which the language behaviors or



strategies reported employing by 10 Vietnamese informants (Axial Coding). The researcher tried the preliminary classification based on the reported purposes of strategy use. Initially, there were 27 groups of statements.

5. The researcher considered these strategies according to the “what” students had done to deal with the situation of English communication with foreigners. As a result, the researchers had to read very carefully every single statement. It was not only to clarify the specific purpose of each action but also to make sure these reported statements in each group shared the similar characteristics in the context. Finally, based on the 99 statements, 27 main groups emerged. It was not easy to code each strategy into a suitable group and to find the suitable name to cover all aspects because some strategies reported seemed to overlap with others.

6. At this step, the researcher did some revision and had discussion with colleagues, a Ph.D. English lecturer. The researcher found that every strategy was initially used to achieve a certain purpose, for

example, to transmit a message or to understand the message. At this stage, the working definition for the present study was also taken into consideration when classifying the emergent strategies (Selective Coding). Reclassifying the initial reported strategies under the two main purposes to be achieved. These include: a) to transmit a message, and b) to understand the message. Taking into account these criteria, 12 of 27 language learning strategies were excluded from the language strategy groups.

7. The researcher started to look at every individual strategy in each group to specify clearly the purpose again and came up with two purposes. Appropriate names for purposes of strategy used were initially given, and then the researcher started to match strategy items and each purpose. At this step, the researcher started to reconsider how these two groups of strategy use could be further classified. The researcher looked through all these groups again to find whether there was a common characteristic these purposes might share. Consequently,



two main categories were identified; a) to transmit a message, and b) to understand the message together with 11 language strategies.

## Results

In classifying language strategies for the present investigation, it was evident that the language strategies in both categories were supportive of each other. The data analysis showed that the emergent strategies for dealing with English communication with foreigners were identified and classified into two main categories. The 11 individual strategies were eventually classified under two main categories: 1) strategies for transmitting a message which contains two subcategories including 1.1 continuous interaction strategies for conveying a message and 1.2 discontinuous interaction strategies for transmitting a message and 2) strategies for understanding the message respectively as explained below:

### Category 1: Strategies for Transmitting a Message

Strategies for transmitting a message to the interlocutor are

reported using to get the intended message across to the interlocutors successfully by a message sender. The analysis of data revealed that language learning strategies and communicative strategies namely compensation or compensatory strategies and social strategies were employed for the success in message transmitting. These strategies might be occurred at the first attempt or after the first attempt with or without an intermission or a pause. More than one attempt might be made before the intended message was successfully transmitted by repeating an action or a series of different actions. This main category was subcategorized into two subcategories regarding the continuing interaction of message sender attempting to convey a message to the receiver. The two subcategories are: continuous interaction and discontinuous interaction as explained below:

#### Subcategory 1.1: Continuous interaction strategies for transmitting a message

The strategies in this subcategory were used to cope with communication interruption. The



message sender reported that she attempted to transmit the intended message to the interlocutor without a pause by using one of the strategies or a series of strategies under this subcategory to achieve the communicative goal. There were four strategies in this subcategory as shown below:

Repeating the sentences by speaking more clearly and slowly

Using body language to express ideas

Drawing pictures or writing the sentences to express ideas

Spelling or writing out the intended words, phrases, or sentences

#### Subcategory 1.2 :

Discontinuous interaction strategies for transmitting a message

'Discontinuous interaction strategies for transmitting a message' refers to the strategies that students reported using as an alternative when they failed to send the message to the interlocutor. In employing the strategies in this subcategory, the student was probably to discontinue the interaction with the interlocutor for a while for seeking a way to transmit

the intended message. Consequently, she could successfully transmit the message across to the interlocutor. The strategies in this subcategory were:

Keeping quiet while thinking about how to response

Asking friends for assistance

Consulting a dictionary, a book, or mobile phone

The results from the researcher's informal observation also supported the explored strategies that the research always found the Vietnamese students tried to use many strategies mentioned above to get the message across to the interlocutor. If they faced some problems which is not so difficult, the compensation strategies such as repetition, gesture, drawing, and spelling were employed to explain those difficult words to keep the conversations continuing. On the other hand, if the problems encountered were so difficult, compensation strategies and also social strategies like keeping quiet for a while for thinking, asking peers, and using dictionary on mobile phone



were employed to transmit the intended message although the conversations were paused for a few moments.

#### Category 2: Strategies for Understanding the Message

The strategies in this category were employed by the message receiver in an attempt to understand the interlocutor's message. The data analysis also elaborated the employment of compensation or compensatory strategies and social strategies in order to understand the intended message. These strategies could be employed either while the message has been transmitting or after the message has been transmitted. Four individual strategies were reported by the informants to achieve the communicative purpose including:

Asking for repetition by speaking more clearly and slowly

Asking the interlocutor to write sentences or draw pictures to express ideas

Asking the interlocutor to simplify the unknown words

Asking friends for assistance

The strategies used by the Vietnamese students mentioned above were correspondent with the results from the researcher's informal observation that compensation strategies and social strategies were observed while they were facing the difficulties in attempting to understand the intended message. They tried to ask for repeating, spelling, writing, and even drawing pictures of the unfamiliar words, and they also asked their friends for explaining in Vietnamese to understand the message and response to their interlocutor.

#### Discussion

Based on the results mentioned above, they revealed that the frequently strategies used by the informants to both transmit the message and to understand the message are the use of both verbal and non – verbal including using repetition, using gestures, and using writing or drawing which were discussed below:

The compensation or compensatory strategies and social strategies (Oxford, 1990, Poulisse,



1987) were reported in the interview and were observed in the informal observation as the main strategies used by Vietnamese students to deal with the difficulties in communication in English with foreigners. The repetition was found in the results of both categories of strategies. This means that it is very crucial for both transmitting and understanding the message. According to the gathered data from the interview, the informants reported that they always used the strategy of asking the interlocutor for a repetition when they could not understand the messages regarding the unfamiliarity of words and accents or their limited linguistic knowledge. This was supported by the study of Bygate (2000) who states that "Knowledge of various ways of getting things repeated, or clarified, or indeed how to repeat and clarify things themselves, is likely to be highly useful." He also indicates that, for language learners, asking for a repetition from the interlocutor may be considered as an important strategy involved in all kinds of oral communication. It is essential for students when they lack linguistic

knowledge in using English which is difficult for them to understand the clear and accurate intentions of interlocutors. The informants also reported that they used the repetition when they attempted to transmit the message when their first attempt of transmitting the message was not successful. This was confirmed by the study of Dobao and Martínez (2007) who states that for communication to succeed, speakers and addressees need to work together and coordinate their individual actions and beliefs in order to build a mutual agreement on the content of their messages. These could be concluded that if the messages are not clearly understood by the both the transmitter and interlocutor, the repetition could be implemented by both of them in order to reach the communicative goal.

Moreover, the use of non-verbal language was reported by the informants in this study as the strategy for transmitting the message and the strategy to show the comprehension. The informants reported that they frequently used the body language to express the ideas when they do not know the words to



transmit their intention. This is consistent with that of Gullberg (2006) states that "Gestures are good for strategies. They are exploited to solve lexical problems, typically in conjunction with speech to request lexical assistance from the native interlocutor. Gestures are also used to deal with problematic communication. In addition, this was supported by the study of Ning (2009) who states that facial expression, the body pose, the gesture, and movement are in accordance with the oral sounds. The finding from this study also reported that the non-verbal language was used during the communication to show the non-comprehension understanding the message. They are in harmony and complete the task to express the emotions and ideas of the communicators. Non-verbal expressions seem to be understandable in terms of their meanings. This was confirmed by the study of Dörnyei (1995) who suggests that learners can "turn to the conversation partners for help either directly, e.g. 'What do you call...?' or indirectly, e.g. raising intonation, pause, eye contact, puzzled

expression." The informants reported that they requested for assistance from their interlocutors when they were unable to understand the interlocutors. These could be said that the non-verbal strategies seem to be important for students to show both comprehension and non-comprehension during communication.

### **Implications for English language teaching and learning**

Based on the findings of this research, some pedagogical implications for English teaching for Thai students regarding strategies used to deal with the oral communication situation were presented for both lecturers and students. For language lecturers, they should introduce the importance and benefit of language strategies in communication to students. The lecturers should also present the students how to employ the language strategies in communication situation for the dealing with the difficulty in communication and to successfully reach the goal of communication accurately. For language students,



they should pay attention on language strategies. They should also practice the language strategies to be ready for dealing with the problems that might be occurred in the situation of communication in English with foreigners. For other researchers, this study might be the guideline for them to find out the use by other context in terms of both nationality of informants and major of students.

### Conclusion

This study attempts to investigate the strategies used by an English major Vietnamese students dealing with the situation of English communication with foreigners.

Regarding the results of the data analysis, 7 emergent strategies were identified and classified into two main categories: 1) strategies for transmitting a message which includes four individual strategies and 2) strategies for understanding the message which consists of three individual strategies. The implications of these findings suggest that language teachers can play an important role in raising students' awareness and encouraging their students to make use of strategies to cope with communication difficulties. As a result, the students' communicative competence may improve.

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