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Strategic English learning and proficiency among Vietnamese tertiary learners: Beyond passive stereotypes

Abstract

Practitioners and researchers worldwide have enthusiastically undertaken research on language learning strategies (LLSs) since the early 1970s. They have since established solid evidence on LLSs as an influential factor in determining success in second/foreign language learning. However in the context of Viet Nam, there is a dearth of evidence regarding LLS and successful second/foreign language learning. The purpose of this study was to examine the frequency and pattern of LLS use among Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) tertiary students. Secondly, it sought to investigate the relationship between LLS use and self-rated English proficiency. Quantitative data were collected from 564 students through a researcher-generated questionnaire, the English Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire (ELLSQ), which had been pretested to ensure validity and reliability. Findings revealed that the students were medium users of learning strategies, and frequency of strategy use was positively correlated with self-reported English proficiency.

Keywords: Learning strategies; Second Language Learning; English; Vietnamese; tertiary students.

Introduction

The use of strategies has been the focus of the language teaching and learning area since the well-known publication “What the good learner can teach us” by Rubin (1975). Recognized worldwide as an aid in language acquisition, language learning strategies (LLSs) are enthusiastically investigated, especially in five sub-areas, including language strategy definition and classification; successful language learners; pattern and frequency of strategy use; factors affecting language learners’ strategy choices and language learning strategy instruction. Varied as they are, contemporary research studies regarding LLSs are based on three principal premises.

The first and most significant premise is that the rational manipulation of LLSs results in improved overall proficiency and specific skill areas. As Griffiths and Parr (2001) indicated, the differential success rate is partially attributable to the varying strategies which different learners employ and bring to the task. This proposition is largely underpinned by the constructivist theory whereby learners have the capability of taking control of their learning. This is achieved by consciously using various learning strategies to construct their own linguistic knowledge and skills through experience and interaction (Griffiths, 2004). Accordingly, learners can potentially improve the effectiveness of their language learning by choosing the most appropriate strategies. This assertion has been proven and reinforced by numerous research studies, particularly among influential ones such as O’Malley (1987), Chamot (2001), Cohen (1998), Oxford (1990), and Wenden (1991).

The second premise is learning strategies are transferable, or they can be taught and learned. As O’Malley and Chamot (1990) stated, when language learning is viewed as a cognitive skill, strategies themselves can be learned to improve language learning ability. This premise has led to the suggestion that insights into the strategies used by successful learners could help less successful learners (Oxford, 1990) and language strategy instruction could be a beneficial addition to curriculum (Blanco, Pino, & Rodriguez, 2010).

The third premise underpinning research regarding LLSs is they are contextually and culturally specific. The development of learner strategies is firstly linked to the type of learning, cultural and social context in which they are situated. For instance, one culture tends to promote active learning whereas another encourages a passive approach (Usuki, 2000). On a smaller scale, the classroom

culture can be designed to “move students beyond thoughtful consumption to reflective construction of language learning strategies” (Grenfell & Erler, 2007, p. 91). The dynamicity of LLSs is also manifest in its connection with learner variables, such as motivation, attitude, age, gender, and proficiency (Peacork & Ho, 2003; Wharton, 2000; Xu, 2011). These individual-specific variables reportedly play a role in determining the appropriateness of strategy use to various extents.

Given the established significance of LLSs, all efforts to gain deeper insights into LLSs are worth further research and insight. This study was especially worthwhile in the context of English teaching and learning in Viet Nam, where research into LLSs had been in its early stage (Duong & Nguyen, 2006). It was believed that the careful investigation and evaluation of the LLS use by Vietnamese EFL students would contribute to build the scientific foundation on which practice-based efforts operate. Specifically, the study aimed firstly to examine the frequency and patterns of LLS use among Vietnamese EFL tertiary students; and secondly, to investigate the relationship between LLS use and self-rated English proficiency.

The study

Research Instrument

A questionnaire, the English Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire (ELLSQ), was developed for this study. The ELLSQ was constructed based on a rigorous review of related literature (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wen, 1995; Purpura, 1999; Cohen & Chi, 2002), and consultation of experts in the field, as well as the target students through focus group discussions. The draft questionnaire then went through a pilot field pre-testing with statistical methods to ensure its validity and reliability. The comprehensive four-stage development of the research instrument was to create a valid context-sensitive and learner-appropriate questionnaire of LLSs among Vietnamese EFL tertiary students.

The ELLSQ consists of 47 closed-ended items and one open-ended item on English learning strategies, as well as 16 closed-ended items on learner variables. The 47 strategies were classified into three main categories based on the principle of goal orientation, namely (1) regulating the learning process (Regulating strategies), (2) mastering the linguistic forms of the target language (Form-based

strategies), and (3) using the target language for meaning interpretation and meaning construction through the four macro skills (Skill-based strategies). At the next level, the strategies were subcategorised by content/skill knowledge to reflect the current structure of the teaching/learning curriculum.

A total of 800 copies of the ELLSQ in both English and Vietnamese versions were made available for students to pick-up on campus and choose to complete. A total of 571 completed questionnaires were returned (response rate of 71.4%). Out of the 571 returned questionnaires, seven invalid questionnaires were later excluded and 564 questionnaires were used for the data analysis of the study.

The Sample

The 564 questionnaire respondents were diverse in terms of gender, year group, and academic major. Regarding gender, the proportion of female was about two times larger than that of male (69.9% and 30.1% respectively). Around half of the student participants were in their first year (49.5%). Second year students accounted for more than one fourth (27.8%) and the remaining were either third year or fourth year students. In terms of their academic majors, the questionnaire survey was relatively equal in terms of participation among students of non-English (51.4%) and English majors (48.6%).

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (including medians, percentages, and frequencies) were used to analyse demographic data and the use of LLS patterns and frequency. Inferential statistics such as Spearman correlation tests were employed, using SPSS version 19, to determine any relationship between the reported strategy use and self-rated proficiency. The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

Findings and discussion

Frequency of LLS use

The findings provided insights into the frequency and pattern of LLS use among the students under study. The frequency of strategy use was measured in the ELLSQ on a five-point Likert rating scale, ranging from “1=Never” (N), “2=Rarely” (R), “3=Sometimes” (S), “4=Often” (O), and to “5=Always

or Almost always” (A). To allow for a convenient synthesis of the findings, the frequency of strategy use by the students was categorised as “low use” (median frequency score = 1 or 2), “medium use” (median frequency score = 3), and “high use” (median frequency score = 4 or 5).

Overall strategy use

The overall median frequency scores across 47 learning strategies and the three main strategy groups are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: *Frequency of overall and group strategy use*

Strategy category	Median
Overall (N=564)	3
Regulating Strategies	3
Form-based Strategies	3
Skill-based Strategies	3

The median frequency score of 3 (“Sometimes”) across all strategies and each strategy group indicated that as a whole the sampled students reported a moderate frequency use of LLSs. In other words, they were reportedly medium users of strategies in English learning. This finding is positive in the sense that the students have developed a moderate level of strategic learning with diverse strategies in English learning. It is especially encouraging when the students were at tertiary level, which requires self-regulation and autonomy in learning as the keys to academic success. Although different in scope and approaches, the findings are consistent with those of other research projects on the use of LLSs by Vietnamese EFL students. Investigating a group of EFL tertiary students in Hanoi, Cao (2009) found that the students were medium strategy users with the overall mean frequency score ranging between 2.5 and 3.5. In a more recent study among Vietnamese EFL high school learners, Henno (2012) revealed that they were medium to high frequency LLS users overall. The similarity in findings across studies has provided some evidence for the profile of Vietnamese EFL students as medium strategy users.

Further analysis into the frequency of individual strategy use would identify the “high use” strategies and “low use” strategies, and thus reveal the most and least frequently used strategies among the sampled students.

Strategy use by group

Regulating strategies, the first main group of strategies in the survey, consisted of 13 strategies used by students to have a general regulation of their English learning. Table 2 provides a detailed account of the use frequency of the 13 strategies in this group.

Table 2: Self-reported use frequency of Regulating strategies

Strategy		N	R	S	O	A	Total	Median
<i>To access and integrate diverse English learning resources,</i>								
1. I use academic print materials (text books, reference books, or lesson notes in English).	n	19	61	141	204	139	564	4
	%	3.4	10.8	25.0	36.2	24.6	100	
2. I use non-academic print materials (newspapers, journals, novels or stories in English)	n	34	162	240	101	27	564	3
	%	6.0	28.7	42.6	17.9	4.8	100	
3. I use traditional broadcast materials (TV shows/movies or radio programs in English).	n	13	67	160	204	120	564	4
	%	2.3	11.9	28.4	36.2	21.3	100	
4. I use recorded materials (English music/recordings from tapes/CDs).	n	28	150	200	144	42	564	3
	%	5.0	26.6	35.5	25.5	7.4	100	
5. I use online/computer-based materials (e-books, e-journals, software, or webcasts in English).	n	29	106	157	161	111	564	3
	%	5.1	18.8	27.8	28.5	19.7	100	
6. I use monolingual (English-English) dictionaries.	n	32	110	162	148	110	562	3
	%	5.7	19.6	28.8	26.3	19.6	100	
<i>To create English learning opportunities,</i>								
7. I attend events where English is used (clubs, seminars, or workshops).	n	115	202	173	52	22	564	2
	%	20.4	35.8	30.7	9.2	3.9	100	
8. I attend evening English classes.	n	81	121	152	139	71	564	3
	%	14.4	21.5	27.0	24.6	12.6	100	
9. I communicate with foreigners (face-to-face or by email/voicemail).	n	49	142	211	115	47	564	3
	%	8.7	25.2	37.4	20.4	8.3	100	
10. I join online forum(s) in English.	n	170	170	131	63	30	564	2
	%	30.1	30.1	23.2	11.2	5.3	100	
11. I maintain a blog/Facebook/webpage in English.	n	89	99	109	122	144	563	3
	%	15.8	17.6	19.4	21.7	25.6	100	
12. To monitor my learning of English, I set specific goals for improving my English.	n	17	92	192	168	95	564	3
	%	3.0	16.3	34.0	29.8	16.8	100	
13. I monitor my progress in English.	n	36	103	210	151	62	562	3
	%	6.4	18.3	37.4	26.9	11.0	100	

The median scores showed that 9 out of 13 Regulating strategies fell within the frequency level of medium use (Median = 3). Notably, the highest median frequency score of 4 (“Often”) were found with Strategies 1 and 3, both of which were related to English learning resources. Academic and traditional

materials such as textbooks, reference books, or TV programs in English were reported to have a high popularity among the sampled students. On the contrary, the lowest median frequency score of 2 (“Rarely”) were found with strategies 7 and 10 in relation to learning opportunities.

In the second main group of Form-based strategies, there were 13 strategies which may be employed to learn the three fundamental components of the language system, namely vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. The detailed results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Self-reported use frequency of Form-based strategies

Strategy		N	R	S	O	A	Total	Median
<i>To learn English vocabulary,</i>								
14. I learn phrases or groups of words (rather than individual words).	n	44	105	230	136	49	564	3
	%	7.8	18.6	40.8	24.1	8.7	100	
15. I rewrite words many times to remember their spellings.	n	36	118	166	154	90	564	3
	%	6.4	20.9	29.4	27.3	16.0	100	
16. I break new words into parts that I know.	n	60	143	211	120	30	564	3
	%	10.6	25.4	37.4	21.3	5.3	100	
17. I make sentences that contain new words.	n	37	128	223	125	51	564	3
	%	6.6	22.7	39.5	22.2	9.0	100	
18. I learn words by topics (e.g. using word webs).	n	64	136	154	159	51	564	3
	%	11.3	24.1	27.3	28.2	9.0	100	
<i>To learn English grammar,</i>								
19. I memorise grammar rules and structures.	n	12	45	124	199	184	564	4
	%	2.1	8.0	22.0	35.3	32.6	100	
20. I do grammar exercises.	n	9	52	151	213	139	564	4
	%	1.6	9.2	26.8	37.8	24.6	100	
21. I make my own sentences using new structures.	n	35	118	209	147	55	564	3
	%	6.2	20.9	37.1	26.1	9.8	100	
22. I analyse the grammatical structures of different texts.	n	41	133	209	134	47	564	3
	%	7.3	23.6	37.1	23.8	8.3	100	
<i>To learn English pronunciation,</i>								
23. I read phonetic transcriptions of words (e.g., that /ðæt/) in the dictionary.	n	31	86	148	156	143	564	4
	%	5.5	15.2	26.2	27.7	25.4	100	
24. I use E-dictionaries or Pronunciation Software for model pronunciation.	n	46	86	158	158	116	564	3
	%	8.2	15.2	28.0	28.0	20.6	100	
25. I practice unfamiliar sounds by saying them again and again.	n	16	76	185	187	100	564	4
	%	2.8	13.5	32.8	33.2	17.7	100	
26. I repeat after native speakers (from recordings or movies).	n	12	55	138	212	146	563	4
	%	2.1	9.7	24.5	37.7	26.0	100	

The results indicate that all Form-based strategies were adopted with a frequency level of medium (Median = 3) or high use (Median = 4). This finding was highly indicative of the utilisation of a form-

based approach in English learning among the students under study. It was important to note that two highly used strategies were related to grammar, and the other three highly used strategies were related to pronunciation.

There were a total of 21 Skill-based strategies, whose frequency of use is displayed in Table 4. As indicated, the median scores of all Skill-based strategies fell within the frequency level of medium (Median = 3) and high use (Median = 4).

Table 4: Self-reported Use Frequency of Skill-based Strategies

<i>Strategy</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Median</i>
<i>For better comprehension in reading,</i>								
27. I read over the text quickly for main ideas before reading carefully.	n	14	59	166	196	129	564	4
	%	2.5	10.5	29.4	34.8	22.9	100	
28. I identify the organisation of the text (compare-contrast, cause-effect, etc.).	n	24	105	258	138	38	563	3
	%	4.3	18.7	45.8	24.5	6.7	100	
29. I skip unimportant words (such as 'the', 'a', 'and', etc.).	n	28	115	189	166	66	564	3
	%	5.0	20.4	33.5	29.4	11.7	100	
30. I guess the meanings of new words from contexts.	n	16	62	187	210	88	563	4
	%	2.8	11.0	33.2	37.3	15.6	100	
31. I make predictions about what will come next.	n	25	102	203	178	56	564	3
	%	4.4	18.1	36.0	31.6	9.9	100	
32. I make summaries about the text (in my mind or in the text margin).	n	41	112	201	163	46	563	3
	%	7.3	19.9	35.7	29.0	8.2	100	
33. I reread parts of the text to understand better.	n	14	56	167	200	126	563	4
	%	2.5	9.9	29.7	35.5	22.4	100	
<i>For better comprehension in listening,</i>								
34. I pay attention to non-verbal cues (gesture, graphics, stress, pause, etc.).	n	23	75	215	177	74	564	3
	%	4.1	13.3	38.1	31.4	13.1	100	
35. I listen for key words or ideas.	n	8	39	127	236	154	564	4
	%	1.4	6.9	22.5	41.8	27.3	100	
36. I take notes of key words or ideas (esp. during lectures, presentations, or tests).	n	20	53	176	206	109	564	4
	%	3.5	9.4	31.2	36.5	19.3	100	
37. I ask the speaker to clarify/repeat to understand better in a conversation.	n	15	85	192	182	89	563	3
	%	2.7	15.1	34.1	32.3	15.8	100	
<i>To better express myself in speaking,</i>								
38. I memorise fixed phrases of different functions (e.g., making a request, or complaint).	n	20	52	208	194	90	564	4
	%	3.5	9.2	36.9	34.4	16.0	100	
39. I rehearse speaking to myself.	n	17	72	152	192	131	564	4
	%	3.0	12.8	27.0	34.0	23.2	100	
40. I explain or give examples if I don't know the exact words.	n	24	75	188	202	75	564	3
	%	4.3	13.3	33.3	35.8	13.3	100	
41. I use synonyms or simpler words if I don't know the exact words.	n	12	64	171	220	97	564	4
	%	2.1	11.3	30.3	39.0	17.2	100	

<i>Strategy</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Median</i>
42. I use body language to help express what I want to say.	n	19	67	147	190	140	563	4
	%	3.4	11.9	26.1	33.7	24.9	100	
<i>To better express myself in writing,</i>								
43. I look for formal ways to express ideas (esp. in essays, or reports).	n	19	70	185	195	95	564	4
	%	3.4	12.4	32.8	34.6	16.8	100	
44. I make an outline of main points before writing.	n	29	83	200	182	69	563	3
	%	5.2	14.7	35.5	32.3	12.3	100	
45. I draft my writing.	n	25	106	180	176	77	564	3
	%	4.4	18.8	31.9	31.2	13.7	100	
46. I revise my writing to improve the language/content.	n	16	57	231	197	63	564	3
	%	2.8	10.1	41.0	34.9	11.2	100	
47. I ask others to comment on my writing.	n	21	90	183	178	92	564	3
	%	3.7	16.0	32.4	31.6	16.3	100	

There were 10 highly used strategies (Median = 4, “Often”), which constituted nearly half (47.6%) of the Skill-based strategies. Importantly, the strategies related to speaking skill improvement were the most highly used by the students, with 4 out of 5 achieving a frequency level of high use (Median = 4). By contrast, only one writing strategy was highly used by the students.

Emerging patterns in LLS use

Out of the 47 strategies, the least frequently used strategies (Median = 2) were Strategy 7 and Strategy 10, both in the Regulating subgroup of strategies to create learning and usage opportunities. Specifically, the student reported to rarely attend events where English is used such as clubs, seminars, or workshops and join online forums in English. It appeared that opportunities for English learning and usage out of the classroom were under-used by the students. Hence, measures should be taken to promote these potential strategies to further assist students in the learning process.

On the other hand, 17 strategies were identified as most frequently used (Median = 4), but they did not exclusively cluster in any specific group. The most noticeable finding was that ten skill-based strategies were highly used, four of which were related to speaking skills. This tendency to highly adopt many skill-based strategies, particularly speaking strategies, suggested exposure to a high frequency of opportunities that necessitate meaning interpretation (reading and listening) and meaning creation (speaking and writing) in English language learning. This is a positive indication of an active approach to the target language whereby strategies for language use are employed, apart from those for formal learning of the language structure. This finding partly reflects the transition from a focus on

form to meaning in English teaching and learning in Vietnam, especially at tertiary level. This gradual movement in focus from grammar/vocabulary to communicative functions has also been acknowledged by many Vietnamese scholars (Le, 2000; Pham, 2005; Henno, 2012). The finding has provided more evidence to challenge previous assumptions about Vietnamese learners concerning their passive and receptive orientation in learning.

It is worth noting, nonetheless, that the conscious learning of grammar was among the high use strategies. This result is indicative of the existence of traditional beliefs and practices in English learning and teaching, whereby grammar plays a significant role in language learning. This finding is in alignment with much of the literature about English learning and teaching practice in Vietnam. As revealed by Le (2011) in his qualitative case study, for example, memorising grammatical rules and terminology, and undertaking controlled grammar exercises in the textbook were considered the best way of learning grammar.

In terms of their functional nature, seven high use strategies were of a repetitive and/or memorisational nature, especially in relation to grammar rules (Strategies 19 and 20), pronunciation (Strategies 25 and 26), speaking skills (Strategies 38 and 39), and writing skills (Strategy 43). Their preference for repetitive and/or memorisational strategies tends to support the findings of previous researchers. A study by Helmke and Vo (1999), for example, showed that repetition played a major role among Vietnamese learners. Duong and Nguyen (2006) also established a firm foundation for memory strategy use among learners in Viet Nam when their study revealed that memorisation was considered part and parcel of students' learning habits.

On the other hand, five high use strategies were of an analytical nature (Strategies 27, 30, 33, 35, and 36); two (Strategies 41 and 42) had a compensatory nature with the use of alternative means to express meaning; and three (Strategies 1, 3, and 23) involved the employment of various resources to learn English. These findings indicate that Vietnamese EFL learners are more than mere rote learners. They are quite active in employing diverse strategies of different functions to enhance their English learning. This finding of the study is consistent with the work of some other researchers. For example, the findings by Helmke and Vo (1999) challenged the rote-learner stereotype with empirical evidence that Vietnamese learners did not have less critical thinking than German students despite their preference for repetition as a learning strategy. Henno (2012) also found that the reported use of certain LLS

categories of Vietnamese EFL students contradicted the general stereotype of Asian students as passive or rote learners.

LLS use and self-reported English proficiency

Self-rated English proficiency

The students were asked to rate their four macro skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing on a four-level proficiency scale of “1 = Limited”, “2 = Fair”, “3 = Good” and “4 = Very good”. Table 5 shows that around half of the survey respondents rated themselves as Fair learners of English across the four macro skills. Specifically, “Fair” level was chosen by 55.7% of the respondents in reading skill, 44.8% in listening skill, 48.8% in speaking skill, and 52.3% in writing skill. “Fair” level accounted for the highest percentages of survey respondents in all four macro skills.

Table 5: Self-rated proficiency in four macro skills

Proficiency level	Reading		Listening		Speaking		Writing	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Very good	14	2.6	16	2.9	29	5.3	9	1.6
Good	169	30.8	128	23.3	165	30.1	115	20.9
Fair	306	55.7	246	44.8	268	48.8	287	52.3
Limited	60	10.9	159	29.0	87	15.8	138	25.1
Total	549	100.0	549	100.0	549	100.0	549	100.0

Another important finding regarding self-rated English proficiency was that the respondents were least confident with listening and writing skills, with 29% and 25.1% respectively indicating “Limited”. On the contrary, 35.4% of the respondents rated their speaking skills as “Good” and “Very good”, constituting the highest percentage.

Overall/group strategy use and self-reported English proficiency

Spearman’s Rank Order Correlation (rho) tests were employed to determine whether there was any statistically significant relationship between strategy use and the respondents’ self-rated English proficiency. Table 6 presents the detailed results of this correlational analysis regarding overall and group strategy use.

Table 6: Spearman's Rank Order Correlation tests on overall and group strategy use by self-rated English proficiency

Strategy category	Spearman's rho	Reading N =549	Listening N =549	Speaking N =549	Writing N =549
Regulating strategies	Correlation	.253**	.247**	.303**	.150**
	Coefficient				
Form-based strategies	Correlation	.176**	.146**	.166**	.180**
	Coefficient				
Skill-based strategies	Correlation	.271**	.271**	.299**	.152**
	Coefficient				
Overall strategies	Correlation	.270**	.261**	.298**	.185**
	Coefficient				

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The results in Table 6 indicated that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between overall strategy use and self-rated English proficiency in all four major skills of reading ($r = 0.270$, $p = .000 < .01$, $r^2 = 0.0729$), listening ($r = 0.261$, $p = .000 < .01$, $r^2 = 0.0681$), speaking ($r = 0.298$, $p = .000 < .01$, $r^2 = 0.0888$), and writing ($r = 0.185$, $p = .000 < .01$, $r^2 = 0.0342$). However, based on Cohen's (1988) interpretation rule, the strength of these correlations was small ($0.10 < r < 0.29$).

Similarly, statistically significant positive correlations were found between the group strategy use (including Regulating, Form-based and Skill-based) and self-rated English proficiency in all four major skills. Noticeably, the strength of these correlations was small ($0.10 < r < 0.29$), except the correlation between Regulating strategy use and self-rated speaking proficiency, which fell between the range of medium correlation ($r = 0.303$, $p = .000 < .05$, $r^2 = 0.0981$).

Adding to the literature on the link between self-rated English proficiency and LLS use, the study found a statistically significant positive correlation in which the more proficient students tended to adopt overall strategies more frequently than the less proficient students. This finding from the study lends support to most studies in the literature attesting to a relationship between proficiency and the frequency of LLS use (Anderson, 2005; Bruen, 2001; Griffiths, 2003; Lee & Oh, 2001; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Park, 1997; Su, 2005; Wharton, 2000).

Individual strategy use and self-reported English proficiency

Further analyses on individual strategy use provided a detailed picture of the differences manifested by the self-rated proficiency groups. Spearman's Rank Order Correlation test results on individual strategy use by self-rated proficiency can be found in Appendix 1, 2, and 3. A summary of the total number of strategies with positive correlations with proficiency in each skill is provided in Table 7.

Table 7: Number of strategies that have significantly positive correlations with self-related English proficiency

Strategy category	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing
Regulating	12/13	10/13	11/13	5/13
Form-based	8/13	6/13	7/13	5/13
Skill-based	20/21	21/21	21/21	12/21
Total	40/47	37/47	39/47	22/47

As a whole, there was a positive correlation, albeit with a small strength, between self-rated English proficiency in any of the four macro-skills and the use of many individual strategies. Noticeably, 18 strategies were significantly correlated with proficiency in all four skills, including those related to regulating the learning process (Strategies 10, 11, 12 and 13), writing (Strategies 43, 44, 45, 46), oral communication (Strategies 25, 40, 41) and those of an analytical nature (Strategies 21, 22, 29, 30, 31, 35, 36). This suggests that more proficient students had a tendency to employ these strategies more frequently than their less proficient counterparts. One possible explanation for this LLS use pattern is that more proficient students are more readily capable of using the target language to create meaning in both written and oral communication. Additionally, they are more linguistically competent in analysing the target language. It seems that more proficient students have shifted from the initial stage of intensive formal learning of the language system to the stage of using the language for meaning interpretation and meaning creation. Similar results have been found by other researchers in the field. Bialystok (1981), for example, discovered that functional practice strategies were associated with proficiency. Green and Oxford (1995) also found that using strategies for active, naturalistic use of English was strongly related to a high level of proficiency.

Implications

1. Insights from the study cast light on the low use of two strategies concerning the creation of learning and usage opportunities. It is suggested that students are encouraged to be more active in the search for an English-rich environment outside of the classroom and engage themselves in more meaningful interactions using the target language.
2. Given the prevalence of repetitive and/or memorisational strategies among the students, it is perhaps constructive for language teachers to explore ways to optimize the effective use of these

strategies in specific learning contexts rather than a complete denial or avoidance. Particularly, the distinction between mechanical memorisation (rote learning with no understanding) and memorisation in order to achieve understanding (Kember, Wong, & Leung, 1999) should be further examined.

3. Towards the goal of enhancing the use of diverse strategies, it is advisable that language teachers pay equal attention to the promotion and endorsement of strategies of different goals, natures, and functions.
4. More proficient students were found to be more frequent users of strategies than the less proficient students. This disparity in strategy use is indicative of the need for less proficient students to strive in emulating more successful students in strategy use to improve language learning outcomes. In addition, the learner variable of proficiency should be taken into account to provide better training and accommodation of LLSs among individual language learners.

Conclusion

This study that has explored English language strategies among Vietnamese tertiary students addresses an issue where there has been an absence of scientific research in the literature. The findings, therefore, aid to fill this knowledge gap and provide potential beneficial insights to various stakeholders, such as Vietnamese EFL teachers, educational administrators, policy makers, and researchers.

For example, among Vietnamese EFL teachers, this study is highly informative regarding the current patterns of LLS use among tertiary students and the positive correlation between LLS use and self-reported English proficiency. EFL teachers may be able to work more effectively as a facilitator in consciously redirecting and adjusting their teaching toward students' preferred strategies.

Additionally, insights from this study can also be of value to educational administrators and policy makers regarding appropriate approaches to enhancing the language learning experience for Vietnamese learners. Aspects of material design, educational objectives, learning opportunity provision, and support services and can be revised to better accommodate the LLSs of Vietnamese students, especially at tertiary levels.

Lastly, in terms of methodological approach, the study used an original instrument for the assessment of LLSs among English learners. Partly adapted from current established tools, the construction of the ELLSQ included adaptation, initial development, refinement and validation to achieve its reliability and validity in the targeted education discourse. For this reason, this study presents a valuable reference and resource for other researchers in the field.

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