

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Perceived learning strategies are “tricks” that learners use to help them go through their learning experiences, such as in activities to help them remember things better or to do tasks more efficiently. Oxford (1990) defines “learning strategies” as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations whereas Nisbet and Shucksmith (1986) define learning strategies simply as “the processes that underlie performance on thinking tasks.” They go on to explain that “strategies are more than simple sequences or agglomerations of skills; they go beyond the ‘strings’ or routines advocated in some study manuals. They are almost always purposeful and goal-oriented, but they are perhaps not always carried out at a conscious or deliberate level. They can be lengthy or so rapid in execution that it is impossible to recapture, recall, or even be aware that one has used a strategy. They move toward a metacognitive approach to strategy use and learning. They believe that since not all learning strategies are equal in terms of usability and ease of acquisition, there exists a hierarchy of strategies which are related to metacognition , or knowledge of one's own mental processes. This confirms Nunan’s (1999) statement that says language learning strategies involve the mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language (Nunan, 1999). Based on these definitions given by researchers in the area of learning strategies, it would

be appropriate to state that learning strategies, in essence, are actions taken by the learner to assist in learning more effectively. In other words, perceived language learning strategies in this study refers to the strategies employed by students to develop the English language knowledge successfully. Accordingly, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) said that learning strategies refer to "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information". Therefore, learning strategies are not only used to facilitate students' successful learning in language acquisition but they are also the steps or tools used to assist the students to become more proficient and confident as Oxford (1990) approves that "appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence."

At large, previous researches have shown that students use certain strategies in learning and acquiring language skills (Tang, 2006, Chamot, 2004, 1988, 1987; Nation, 2001; Green, John, and Oxford, 1995; Cohen and Andrew, 1991; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Bialystok, 1983) for example, in their planning before writing, accessing to sources of vocabulary knowledge, skimming and scanning during reading comprehension, or recalling previous learning on certain grammatical language forms and functions. This group of students who use learning strategies become more efficient and independent learners because there are also past researches that have shown apparent strategies used in terms of second or foreign language learning processes that contribute directly to successful language learning (Wong-Fillmore (1976), Tarone (1977), Naiman et al. (1978), Bialystok (1979), Cohen and Apeh (1981), Wenden (1982), Chamot and O'Malley (1987), Politzer and McGroarty. A review of literature on e-learning strategies

(Rosenberg, 2001) has also informed us that it is virtually impossible for students to remember all the information that is made available to them and therefore, it is clear that today's students must be equipped with knowledge of learning strategies. This means to say that the impact of learning strategies has become so prominent that students nowadays have to be rethink, reconstruct, and reprioritize their current learning strategies so that they will be better able to deal with the Information Age, especially when vast amount of information are delivered in the English language.

Language learning strategies are also perceived by students from both genders. Researchers have been exploring various factors that affect the use of strategies by learners and a recent study made by Gu (2002) has shown that besides academic major, gender is seen as the primary role in influencing language learning. Oxford (1989) has also accounted that gender influences are among the list of important factors such as language being learned, duration, degree of awareness, age, affective variables (attitudes, motivation level/ intensity, language learning goals, motivational orientation), personality characteristics and general personality type, learning style, aptitude, career orientation, national origin, language teaching methods, and task requirements. Similarly, there have been numerous studies done relating to gender differences in language learning strategies. Findings from past researches showed that there was a significant gender difference in the use of learning strategies as a whole (Kamarul Shukri Mat Teh, Mohamed Amin Embi, Nik Mohd Rahimi Nik Yusoff, 2009). Considering the fact that language learning strategies can enhance language achievement and that knowledge about these strategies

may improve instruction, it is important to study how students from two different gender groups use the learning strategies.

The importance and benefits of this study when applied to the language teaching and learning field, the proverb: “Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime” might be interpreted to mean that if students are provided with answers, the problem could be solved on the spot. But if students are taught the strategies to work out the answers for themselves, they become in control their own learning. Abraham & Vann (1987), Chamot (1987), Cohen & Apeh (1981), Hosenfeld (1977) and Wenden (1991) also acknowledge that students can be taught to learn the language if they are also taught the strategies that facilitate language acquisition. Hence, this study focuses on the perceived use of language learning strategies by secondary school students not only in regard to their level of schooling but also to the students’ gender.

1.1 Background of the Study

The interest of this study is to find out what are the perceived use of language learning strategy among 325 students studying in a rural school because previous researches have shown us that there is a significant correlation between language learning strategies, gender and students’ school level (Bialystok, 1981; Huang & Van Naerssen, 1987; Kamarul Shukri et al., 2008; O’Malley et al., 1985; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Green and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1990). It is noted that these studies are mostly related to the western background and a few from Japan, Taiwan and Korea (Sy, 1994; Chen, 2000; Su, 2003) where uptown secondary schools are concerned. In developed

countries the application of learning strategies on language learning has gained acceptance in their education reforms. However, it is not known whether students from a suburban school with limited exposure to modern technologies, life and culture employ certain knowledge of learning strategies in their language classroom. It is also not known whether there are any differences or similarities in their choices of language learning strategies among the gender groups and school level.

Tercanlioglu (2004), Ghani (2003), Goh and Foong (1997) and Kaylani (1996) have reported that gender and age level are some of the distinctive factors that influence the choice of learning strategies used. They found out that female learners reported greater overall strategy use than male learners in many studies (although sometimes males do better than females in the use of a particular strategy) and also students of different ages and stages of L2 learning use different strategies, with certain strategies often being used by older or more advanced students. As gender is an issue with important theoretical and pedagogical implications in second language learning, it has received some attention in language learning strategy research (Oxford, 1993; Oxford, Young, Ito & Sumrall, 1993; Oxford, 1995; Young & Oxford 1997). These studies have found that gender can have a significant impact on how students learn a language. An emerging theory for this gender difference proposes that although sometimes males surpassed females in the use of a particular strategy, females employ more learning strategies or employ strategies more effectively (Erhman and Oxford, 1989; Nyikos, 1990; Oxford, 1994; Sheorey, 1999). Oxford and Nyikos (1989) who looked at the strategies used by 1200 university students, concluded that gender differences had a

"profound influence" (p.296) on strategy use, and that females used strategies more frequently than males. Ehrman and Oxford (1990) stated that women at the Foreign Service Institute definitely reported more use of strategies. Green and Oxford (1995) reported on a study of 374 students at the University of Puerto Rico, and concluded that females used strategies significantly more often than males. Although most studies in this area seem to have reported a greater use of language learning strategies by women, Tran (1988) discovered that Vietnamese women use fewer language learning strategies than men.

Bialystok (1981) and Oxford & Nyikos (1989) found differences in strategy use as students advanced in foreign languages. Formal practice with rules and forms was less and less effective (and less used) as students advanced, but functional practice with communicative language showed no such limitations. Advancement in school level or years of study does not necessarily mean that students use better strategies in every instance. Cohen and Apeh (1981), in studying English speakers who were learning Hebrew, discovered that both effective and non-effective learning strategies appeared across course levels. Nevertheless, most of the research does indeed show that, in general, the more advanced the language learner, the better the strategies used. It might be hypothesized that more advanced students would use somewhat different learning strategies than the lower forms in the secondary schools, since it was indicated that students of different ages and different stages of L2 learning used different learning strategies often being employed by more advanced students (Chamot et al. 1987; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1992)

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This purpose of this study is to explore the perceived use of language learning strategy among secondary school students in Betong suburban areas in regard to their gender and school level. Gender and school level are often regard as the major factors that influence language learning. However empirical studies on these two factors have produced inconsistent results because they are not consistently done in the places that have the same cultural background, beliefs, or academic majors. Neither was there any studies done with students that employ the same technique of learning styles or attitudes. Hence, is it possible for us to conclude that students in a suburban school perceive the same learning strategies in their language classrooms?

With the English language becoming the yardstick for the schools' academic performance especially in PMR, variables such as gender and students' secondary level are increasingly impacted by learning strategies used in language classrooms. What the female students perceived in their language classrooms are usually projected in their participation to speak out in English during lessons. Male students are mostly quiet and absorptive as they will only 'speak when spoken to'. In suburban schools, female students dominate most in the English co-curricular academic competitions especially in choral speaking, debate, and drama. Out of four English Language competitions, a male student would only be provoked to join at least once in their school life in public speaking competition. Language quizzes, progressive tests and term exam results do show a majority of the female students' perform better than the opposite group.

However, as the students go to their upper forms, the male students tend to be more outstanding in their performance. Therefore, what really matters here is that do students regardless of their gender and school level perform the same learning strategies or otherwise? Why is it so? Could they retain their learning strategies as they go on to higher levels?

Little is currently known regarding the perceived used of language learning strategy among the students in suburban schools in relation to their gender and secondary level. This makes it difficult for teachers to identify what are the learning strategies employed by the female and male students and to retain their ability to use the strategies in language learning as they move on to their upper forms. This present study will address this problem, focusing specifically on the learning strategies in language classrooms in regard to students' gender and school level to help maximize the English language performance in suburban schools. Hence, because gender and school level are identify in the literature as potentially valuable students' characteristics in relation to language learning strategies used, they are selected as the independent variables for this study.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study are to identify whether there are any significant difference in the types of language learning strategy use among the students in relation to their gender and school level. Plenty of research findings have shown us that successful students are known to employ certain learning strategies to help them in retaining and retrieving

information learnt or acquire in classroom activities. Other studies have also proven us that better students are able to maintain certain strategies in language learning as they progress through their academic stages. But, we do not know how far students from rural background are utilizing learning strategies in language classrooms or none. Furthermore, although these students perform well in their tests or exams, many express difficulty in understanding British or American English and even their teachers. Hence, this study will provide an insight into whether these students have certain learning strategies to help them in their language learning or are they just performing their language capability without considering if their performance makes any sense. The impetus of this study is a desire to detect students' language learning strategies and thus making them a necessity to help in language improvement and performance.

1.4 Research Objectives

In this study, there are four main objectives:

- i. To investigate if there is any significant difference in the types of language learning strategy use among the upper secondary male students;
- ii. To find out if there is any significant difference in the types of language learning strategy use among the upper secondary female students;
- iii. To find out if there is any significant difference in the types of language learning strategy use among the lower secondary male students; and
- iv. To determine whether there is any significant difference in the types of language learning strategy use among the lower secondary female students.

1.5 Research Questions

This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- (a) Is there a significant difference in the types of language learning strategy used among the upper secondary male students in a suburban school?
- (b) Is there a significant difference in the types of language learning strategy used among the upper secondary female students in a suburban school?
- (c) Is there a significant difference in the types of language learning strategy used among the lower secondary male students in suburban school?
- (d) Is there a significant difference in the types of language learning strategy used among the lower secondary female students in suburban school?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The present study aims to investigate the use of language learning strategies among the secondary school students and to find out whether there are any significant differences towards the use of language learning strategies among the students in regard to their gender and school level. With the exposure of the related language learning strategies, teachers will be able to help, not only the high proficiency students but as well as the struggling students to gain control of the important strategies so that they can facilitate themselves well in preparation for their future undertakings especially in their employment in various fields. Besides that, ESL teachers will gain insights into the different groups of students' learning strategies and enable them to tailor the appropriate tasks for their students in the classroom so that students would be aware of the strategies that could help them be better language learners.

1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 Strategy

It refers to *a tactic that the student employs implicitly and explicitly while learning in their language classroom.*

1.7.2 Language learning

Language learning differs from language acquisition. In this study, *it means teaching and learning activities that happen in formal classroom setting.*

1.7.3 Memory strategy

It is one of the learning strategies used in language learning. It refers to the storing of information into groups, clusters or clustering or grouping or using imageries that function in the students' mind to assist them in storing and retrieving information.

1.7.4 Cognitive strategy

This is another one of the learning strategies which refers to students' way of using summarization and deductive reasoning so that they are able to understand and produce new language information.

1.7.5 *Compensation strategy*

This learning strategy is used in language classroom that make use of synonyms or guessing would allow the students to use the language even though they do not have enough vocabulary knowledge of the language.

1.7.6 *Affective strategy*

This refers to one of the learning strategies used by students to control their emotions and attitudes toward learning.

1.7.7 *Social strategy*

This refers to students' social interactions such as asking for clarification, questions or cooperating with their peers in language learning classroom.

1.7.8 *School Level*

School level refers to the lower and upper forms in a secondary school. The lower or junior forms are the Form 1 until Form 3 after which the students will sit for their PMR public exam. Students will then move on the Form 4 and 5 and will attain to their SPM which is another public exam before they could move on to Form 6.

1.7.9 *Suburban Secondary Schools*

These are the schools that are situated further into the interior region of a town or which are more than 25 kilometers from the district education office. In this

study, a majority of the students come from the longhouses or *kampong* (villages) around Saratok district, which is another subdivision district in Betong Division.

Summary

This chapter has introduced to a general overview to the perceived language learning strategy. In this chapter the background for the study has been introduced, the problem has been described, the purpose of the study has been indicated, and the research questions that intended to guide the investigation has also been listed. The significance of the study has also been stated, followed by a statement of limitations. The researcher has also provided a list of definitions of the key terms that will be used in this study.

It is noted in this chapter that learning strategies are equally important for students in suburban secondary schools regardless of their gender and secondary school level. The study conducts descriptive findings for both the female and male students in their upper and lower forms to find out if there are any significant differences between the language learning strategies perceived by secondary students in a suburban district. Hence, the hope to create awareness among the students in using the correct and useful learning strategies that could improve and enhance the students' performance the English language in suburban schools becomes the distinctive drive of this present research.