

The Level of Language Learning Strategy Use and English Language Proficiency of English Major Students, Burapha University

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ABSTRACT

The research primarily focuses on the level of language learning strategy use referring to the Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and the level of English language proficiency. Also, this study aims at determining the relationship between the level of LLS use and the level of English language proficiency. 154 third-year English major students in the English and literature and business English tracks, Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Burapha University, Thailand, were the respondents of the study. The findings revealed that the students in both English and literature and business English tracks used language learning strategies at a moderate level (Mean = 3.40 and 3.33, respectively). As measured by the TOEFL ITP test, students in the English and literature track scored higher than those in the business English track. Finally, there was a positive weak correlation found between the level of LLS use and English language proficiency in both groups. The findings of LLS will give teachers a better understanding of learning methods of students, and teachers can also promote appropriate strategies to improve EFL students' learning ability.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, English language proficiency

Introduction

In this era, the student-centered learning approach is highly encouraged while teacher-centered approach has been less emphasized (Liu & Chang, 2013; Liu, 2015). This leads to an increasing interest in learning styles and learning strategies in second and foreign language learning. Characteristics of good language learners have generated more interest in the understanding of nature of language learning, individual differences, and variables that influence the language learner outcome (Rubin 1975; Stern 1975). By deeply exploring language learning strategies of EFL students, teachers can help develop learners' competency and proficiency. Rubin (1975) proposed that good language learning depends on at least three variables which are aptitude, motivation, and opportunity. Therefore, it is of great importance that teachers train learners some learning strategies so that they can utilize in their learning and also promote knowledge and employment of those strategies to learners along with creating a fun and friendly learning environment in class to help them achieve their goals. Furthermore, the discovery of learning strategy use of learners will give both teachers and learners directions on what can be done about one's ability (Oxford, 1994). In order to assess language learning strategy, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was invented by Rebecca Oxford. It focuses on six learning strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

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Besides LLS, knowing the level of English language proficiency is another aspect that helps learners know which skills need improvement. In fact, there are several ways to assess students' English proficiency. The TOEFL ITP Level 1 test is one of the world's most widely accepted and respected standardized English-language assessments. The test evaluates language skills in three areas: listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. The maximum score is 677. The scores of the test can be interpreted according to a Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) mapping study and a score descriptor study by skill. This provides both teachers and test takers with a better understanding of English-language proficiency including areas of strength and areas that need improvement.

The Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Burapha University, Thailand, started offering a Bachelor's degree in English language in 1954. According to the alumni's feedback, the department at present offers a dual curriculum for undergraduates majoring in English languages. The two study tracks are English and literature track and business English track. The first track aims at familiarizing students with language theories and both analytical and critical skills through speaking, reading, writing, and communicating in English. The other track, business English, encourages students to be able to use the English language in various professional business settings. Although both tracks have the same core courses, there are some differences in the major requirements and elective courses. Students are requested to choose their track at the end of the first semester of their 2nd year. As a result, in an academic year the third-year students are required to take more English courses than others students.

However, there is currently no study investigating the students' language learning strategy use and English language proficiency of students in both tracks. This study, therefore, aims to find out the level of language learning strategy use and English language proficiency of the third-year English major students as well as the relationship between the two variables. All in all, the findings of the study can be beneficial for teachers in the department to know their students' English language ability and to promote students' appropriate language learning strategies in order to enhance the teaching and learning outcomes.

Objectives

The research objectives are in details below:

1. To investigate the level of language learning strategy use employed by English major students in the English and literature and business English tracks
2. To examine the level of students' English language proficiency in the English and literature and business English tracks according to CEFR
3. To find out whether there is a relationship between the level of language learning strategy use and English language proficiency of English major students in both the English and literature and business English tracks

Research Questions

1. What are the levels of language learning strategy use in third-year English major students in the English and literature and business English tracks at Burapha University?
2. What are the levels of English language proficiency of third-year English major students in the English and literature and business English tracks at Burapha University?

3. Is there any correlation between the level of the employment of language learning strategies and English language learning proficiency of students in the two groups?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 154 third-year English major students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Burapha University. The students were from two study tracks: English and literature track and business English track. 69 students were from English and literature track, and 85 students were students from business track.

Instrument

Two instruments were employed in the study as follows:

A questionnaire on language learning strategies. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts asking about students' demographics and their language learning strategy use. Referring to the first part, there were two questions about the respondents' demographics, student identifications and their study tracks. The last part comprised of 50 questions of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0, (Oxford, 1990) for assessing the level of students' language learning strategy use. The questions were divided into six categories of language learning strategies: memory (items 1-9), cognitive (item 10-23), compensation (items 24-29), metacognitive (items 30-38), affective (items 39-44), and social (45-50). All 50 items are a 5 Likert-scale to indicate the frequency of language learning strategy use ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always). The questionnaire on LLS was translated into Thai for a better understanding for Thai EFL students.

The TOEFL ITP test. The test was a complete TOEFL ITP practice test extracted from "Official Guide to the TOEFL ITP Test" published by the Educational Testing Service (2014) to assess students' English proficiency level in three different skills: listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. There were 140 items in total in the test- 50 items for listening comprehension, 40 items for structure and written expression, and 50 items for reading comprehension. All questions were multiple choice, and students answer questions by filling in an answer sheet. According to the information stated on the Educational Testing Service's website, a Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) mapping study was conducted in 2011 and a score descriptor study in 2014. A score descriptor helps to interpret scores of a test taker. It provides the minimum TOEFL ITP section scores for four of the levels defined in the CEFR (A2, B1, B2, and C1).

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers informed the participants about the subjects and the purpose of the study. The researchers introduced the SILL questionnaire and distributed it to the participants during February of the second semester academic year 2017. The questionnaire was adapted from the 50-item version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0, (Oxford, 1990). The questionnaires were completed and returned within one day. The information from the questionnaires was computed to find out mean and standard deviation.

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Table 1
Interpretation of Language Learning Strategy Use

Mean Score of Strategy Use	Interpretation of the Strategy Use
0-2.4	Low
2.5-3.4	Medium
3.5-5.0	High

The participants took TOEFL ITP test in March, 2017. The participants were informed of the purpose and the process of completing the test beforehand. The test consisted of three parts which were listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. The scores from each part of the test were computed and analyzed to determine English language proficiency based on CEFR level ranged from A2 to C1.

Table 2
TOEFL ITP Test Scaled Cut Scores for Each Section

Listening Comprehension	Structure and Written Expression	Reading Comprehension	Overall Performance	CEFR Level
64-68	64-68	63-67	627-677	C1 Proficient user/ operational proficiency
54-63	53-63	56-62	543-626	B2 Independent user/ vantage
47-53	43-52	48-55	460-542	B1 Independent user/ threshold
38-46	32-42	31-47	337-459	A2 Basic user/ waystage

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to identify the relationship between language learning strategy use and the level of English language proficiency.

Literature Review

Language Learning Strategies

The term “language learning strategies” has been defined by many researchers. Wenden and Rubin (1987) stated that strategies are “any sets of operations, steps, plans, and routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information. Oxford (1990) referred to language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations”. Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) illustrated that “learning strategies are intentional behavior and thoughts that learners make use of during learning in order to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information.” According to Stern (1992), the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques. O’ Mally and Chamot (1990) stressed a similar concept of learning strategies like Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) that “learning strategies” are the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to

help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information. Therefore, learning strategies can be considered as ways that learners employ in order to help them comprehend, learn, and facilitate their learning process to reach their goal of successful learners.

Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Many researchers have categorized language learning strategies into different ways according to different approaches.

Rubin (1975) divided a classification of language learning strategies under two main groupings with a number of subgroups. The first category consists of strategies that directly affect learning, including clarification/ verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/ inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, and practice. The second category consists of strategies that contribute indirectly to learning, including creating practice opportunities and using production tricks such as communication strategies.

Wenden and Rubin (1987) made a distinction between strategies contributing directly to learning and those contributing indirectly to learning. Direct strategies include cognitive and metacognitive. Indirect strategies include communicative and social strategies. According to Rubin, there are three types of strategies used by learners that contribute either directly or indirectly to language learning. These strategies are learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies.

O' Malley and Chamot (1990) classified learning strategies into three categories which are metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies. Another widely accepted classification of learning strategies was proposed by Oxford (1990). She divided the strategies into two main categories which are direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are subdivided into three groups, consisting of memory, cognitive, and compensation whereas indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social.

Another widely accepted classification of learning strategies was proposed by Oxford (1990). She divided the strategies into two main categories which are direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are subdivided into three groups, consisting of memory, cognitive, and compensation whereas indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social. The six subdivided classes can be can be elaborated as follows:

1. Memory strategies such as creating mental linkages, applying images and sound, reviewing well, and employing actions enable learners to store new information in memory for retrieving when needed to communicate.
2. Cognitive strategies are practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing, and reasoning. Cognitive strategies deal with handling the target language.
3. Compensation strategies such as guessing when coming across unknown words aid learners to overcome limitations in reading and writing so that they can still communicate.
4. Metacognitive strategies are when learners manage their learning by planning, arranging, centering, and evaluating their learning process. These strategies also include setting goals and objectives in learning.
5. Affective strategies helps learners to manage their feelings, emotions, motivations, and attitude associated with learning. Learners can achieve these strategies by lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking emotional temperature.
6. Social strategies such as asking questions and cooperating with others facilitate learning with others.

Language Learning Strategy Use and English Language Proficiency

There have been many studies conducted to examine language learning strategy and English language proficiency of EFL learners.

Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012) examined 90 university students majoring in TEFL in two universities from two cities in Iran. They were selected based on a proficiency test, a sample TOEFL test which consisted of 70 multiple choice items including vocabulary, structure, and reading comprehension. The majority of students were classified as intermediate (46.6%). The researchers also examined LLS use of students in different proficiency level. Advanced learners used compensation and metacognitive strategies at a high level, but none of them used cognitive strategy. On the other hand, most of the intermediate learners used metacognitive as the highest strategy (50%), followed by social strategy (19.04%) while for elementary learners, the dominant strategies were memory and cognitive.

Zare (2012) attempted to discuss the factors influencing strategy choice and explore the relationship between learning strategies and language learning achievement. The researcher concluded that many factors affect the choice learning strategies. Those factors might include degree of awareness, age, sex, nationality, learning style, personality traits, motivation, learning context, and language proficiency. Findings have demonstrated that learners with high motivation use a significantly greater range of learning strategies than less motivated students. The findings also revealed that advanced language learners have reported to employ learning strategies more frequently than elementary students.

Alhaysony (2017) investigated language learning strategies used by Saudi EFL students at Aljouf University. (66 males, 68 females) completed a questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The average of strategy use was in low to medium range. Cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies were used most frequently, while memory and affective strategies were reported to be least frequently used.

Findings

Level of Language Learning Strategy Use

Means and standard deviations of the six categories of language learning strategies were computed to find out the level of language learning strategy use of students from English and literature track and business English track.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and CVs Showing Level of Language Learning Strategy Use of Students from English and Literature Track

Strategy Category	Mean	SD	Coefficient of Variation	Interpretation of Strategy Use
Memory	3.13	.48	15.33%	Medium
Cognitive	3.51	.46	13.10%	High
Compensation	3.68	.58	15.76%	High
Metacognitive	3.57	.52	14.56%	High
Affective	3.00	.48	16%	Medium
Social	3.52	.65	18.46%	High
Overall	3.40	.36	10.58%	Medium

Table 3 shows the results examined from the participants from English and literature track on the use of the six language learning strategies. The most frequently used strategy was compensation strategies (Mean=3.68), and the least frequently used strategy was

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affective strategies (Mean=3.00) while between the two in respective order were metacognitive strategies (Mean=3.57), social strategies (Mean=3.52), cognitive strategies (Mean=3.51), and memory strategies (Mean=3.13). The mean score of overall strategy use was 3.40, a range defined medium use.

Table 4

Means, Standard Deviations, and CVs Showing Level of Language Learning Strategy Use of Students from Business English Track

Strategy Category	Mean	SD	Coefficient of Variation	Interpretation of Strategy Use
Memory	3.13	.49	15.17%	Medium
Cognitive	3.34	.51	15.26%	Medium
Compensation	3.47	.57	16.42%	Medium
Metacognitive	3.59	.55	15.32%	High
Affective	3.06	.51	16.66%	Medium
Social	3.37	.64	18.99%	Medium
Overall	3.33	.40	12.01%	Medium

Table 4 presents the results of the use of the six language learning strategies of the participants from business English track. The findings indicated that the most frequently used strategy was metacognitive strategy (Mean=3.59), and the least frequently used strategy was affective strategy (Mean=3.06). The mean score of the overall strategy use was 3.33, a range defined medium use. The results also revealed that the students used memory, cognitive, compensation, affective, and social strategies at a moderate level (Mean = 3.13, 3.34, 3.47, 3.06, and 3.37 respectively).

According to Table 3 and Table 4, the results from the students from English and literature track reported higher mean scores in all the six categories. Furthermore, affective strategies were the least used by both groups (Mean 3.00, and 3.06 respectively). The information from Table 3 and Table 4 also showed that the coefficient of variation of the overall learning strategies of the English and literature track was 10.58% while the business English track was 12.01%, meaning that the latter had more dispersion to its mean.

Level of English Language Proficiency

TOEFL ITP test was used to determine the level of English language proficiency of students. Means, standard deviations, minimum score, and maximum score were computed to determine the English language proficiency level of the participants.

Table 5

Levels of English Language Proficiency by Skills of Students from English and Literature Track

Skills	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Proficiency Level
Listening Comprehension	48.58	4.71	33	57	B1
Structure and Written Expression	47.29	4.61	38	57	B1
Reading Comprehension	44.52	5.34	31	56	A2
Overall proficiency	467.96	38.86	350	553	B1

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Table 5 shows levels of English language proficiency by skills of students from the English and literature track. The skills were determined by TOEFL ITP score descriptors in listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. Out of 68, the mean score of this group in listening comprehension was 48.58, and 47.29 in structure and written expression. As a result, their English proficiency in both skills belonged to a B1 level. However, the mean score in reading comprehension was 44.52 from 67; they belonged to A2 level.

Table 6

Levels of English Language Proficiency by Skills of Students from Business English Track

Skills	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Proficiency Level
Listening Comprehension	45.14	4.96	35	60	A2
Structure and Written Expression	42.61	4.73	31	55	B1
Reading Comprehension	39.94	4.83	28	55	A2
Overall Proficiency	425.69	40.02	343	540	A2

Table 6 represents levels of English language proficiency by skills of students from the business English track. As shown, the mean score of the students in structure and written expression was 42.61 from 67. However, their mean scores of listening comprehension and reading comprehension were 45.14 from 68 and 39.94 from 67, respectively. Based on the scores, their level of English language proficiency in both listening comprehension, and reading comprehension belonged to A2.

According to Table 5, the mean TOEFL ITP score of the students from English and literature track was 467.96 out of 677 with standard deviation of 38.869. According to TOEFL ITP overall performance descriptors, their proficiency level belonged to B1 (an independent user- Threshold). Meanwhile, in Table 6, the mean score of students from business English track was 425.69 with standard deviation of 40.022. The standard deviation was very high because of the dramatic difference between the lowest and the highest scores, 343 and 540 respectively. Based on the performance descriptors, their English proficiency belonged to A2 level (a basic user- Waystage).

Table 7

English Language Proficiency Level of Students from English and Literature Track and Business English Track

Proficiency Level	English and Literature Track		Business English Track	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
C1	0	0	0	0
B2	2	2.9	0	0
B1	42	60.9	14	16.5
A2	25	36.2	71	83.5
Total	69	100	85	100

Table 7 gives information about numbers of students in English and literature track and business track classified by their English language proficiency level. It reveals that 42 (60.9%) students from English and literature track belonged to B1 level (Independent user- Threshold) and 25 (36.2%) to A2 level (basic user- Waystage). There were only two students

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(2.9%) obtain a B2 level (Independent user- Vantage). None of them fell in C1 level (Proficient user- Effective operational proficiency).

Meanwhile, out of 85 students, 71 (83.5%) students from business English track had their English language proficiency in A2 level (Basic user- Waystage). On the other hand, 14 (16.5%) belonged to B1 (Independent user- Threshold). There was no one belonging to B2 (Independent user- Vantage) or C1 (Proficient user-effective operational proficiency).

Correlation between Language Learning Strategy Use and EFL Proficiency

Table 8

Correlation between Language Learning Strategy Use EFL Proficiency of Students from English and Literature Track and Business English Track

Strategy	English and Literature Track (N=85)		English Business Track (N=69)	
	r	p	r	p
Memory	.022	.855	.100	.365
Cognitive	.361**	.002	.429**	.000
Compensation	.188	.121	.094	.391
Metacognitive	.098	.421	.168	.125
Affective	-.085	.485	.019	.862
Social	.091	.458	.025	.822
Overall	.162	.182	.183	.094

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

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

Table 8 presents the correlation between language learning strategy use and English language proficiency of students from both English and literature and business English tracks. Regarding the strategy use and the proficiency from students in English and literature track, there was a weak correlation between overall language learning strategy use and English proficiency level ($r = .162$, $p = .182$). Only one category of language leaning strategies, cognitive strategy, was significantly correlated with TOEFL-ITP score ($r = .361$, $p = .002$). This indicated that the higher the students' use of cognitive strategies, the higher their scores are.

According to business English track, there was also a weak correlation between overall language strategy use and English proficiency level ($r = .183$, $p = .094$). Interestingly, only cognitive strategy had a signification correlation with TOEFL-IPT score ($r = .429$, $p = .000$).

In English and literature track, the weak correlation was between memory strategy and TOEFL-ITP score ($r = .022$, $p = .855$) whereas in business English track, the weakest correlation was between affective strategy and TOEFL-ITP score ($r = .019$, $p = .862$). In English and literature track, only affective strategy revealed negative correlation with TOEFL-ITP score ($r = -.085$, $p = .485$), indicating that the use of affective strategies slightly decreased as English proficiency increased.

Discussion

The current study revealed that English major students from both English and literature track and business English track used language learning strategies at a moderate level (Mean= 3.40 and 3.33 respectively). These findings support other studies of EFL learners on SILL (Pannak and Chiramanee, 2011; Liu, 2015; Tse, 2011) which reported the

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overall strategy use at a medium range. In terms of the most frequently used strategy, compensation strategies were frequently used by the students from English and literature track (Liu and Chang, 2013; Liu, 2015; and Tse, 2011) whereas the most frequently used strategy of students from business English track was metacognitive strategies which were similar to the findings of Pannak and Chiramanee's (2011), and Salahshour et al's (2013). To conclude, the findings showed that the most dominant strategies that participants in the recent study adopted in language learning were compensation and metacognitive strategies. These findings were similar to Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012) and Alhaysony (2017). On the other hand, the least adopted strategies of high proficiency students were affective strategies. This recent study produced similar findings to a previous study conducted by Salahshour et al's (2013).

There are many standardized tests employed to measure the English language proficiency. One of the tests is TOEFL ITP test, and it is used to assess core English skills in listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. The findings from the study show that the mean scores of the third-year students in English and literature track, and business English at Burapha University are 467.96 and 425.69. Similarly, Tanaka (2003) applied a TOEFL test to find out English language proficiency of the 19-20 year old Japanese students in English major. It was found that the score representing the student's English language proficiency was 445.28. Apparently, the students' English proficiency from both studies belongs to the same level. Nizonkiza (2017) is another person who used a TOEFL test to classify the English ability of English-major students at University. However, Nizonkiza's students were grouped by the average TOEFL scores into three levels: 335.17 in level 1, 386.40 in level 2, and 444.63 in level 3. In a separate study, Gobel and Kano (2017) did sampling only third-year non-English major students who had TOEFL scores in the range of 437-515. All in all, the TOEFL test is still a valid tool researchers use to assess the English language proficiency. As mentioned, the average English proficiency of undergraduate students varied.

The findings on the correlation between language learning strategy use and EFL proficiency of this recent study indicated that the higher the proficiency level students have, the frequent use of strategies they employ. The study produced the similar results to Nisbel (2005) that is the weakest correlation was found between affective strategies and proficiency. However, Nisbel (2005) proposed that the six categories of learning strategies were significantly correlated with one another.

Limitations

The respondents of the study were only 154 third-year English major students in English and literature track, and business English track, Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Burapha University, Thailand. As a result, the level of language learning strategy use and English proficiency could represent only this group of students. The study was conducted from February 2017- January 2018.

Recommendations

The findings of this study were based on only the third-year English major students at Burapha University, Thailand. Therefore, the ability to define and generalize the results is limited. A bigger scale of subjects would yield more impact if teachers and instructors really want to improve the English proficiency of EFL students. Furthermore, other methods of data collection should be implemented rather than using only SILL survey in order for the researcher to gain more valid and reliable data from the participants.

Conclusion

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The study aims to investigate the level of language learning strategy use, and the level of English proficiency of students in both English and literature and business English tracks from the Department of Western Languages, Burapha University, Thailand. The results of the study revealed that students from both tracks employed the six learning strategies ranged from medium to high use. The dominant strategies were compensation and metacognitive strategies. The findings of LLS use will help support instructors to boost more promotion of LLS use and set a direction on how to get students to be more familiar with a variety of language learning strategies. As this research indicated affective strategy was the least used one, students need to be more aware of this strategy. In terms of English language proficiency, the students from English and literature track were independent users (C1) while the students from business English track were basic users (A2). It is important that instructors keep records of students' English language proficiency and compare the attained data to design and initiate supportive programs to improve student's proficiency to meet the international standard requirements. The study also indicated that there was a relationship between language learning strategies and English proficiency of the students, meaning that proper and sufficient knowledge of learning strategies influence their learning outcomes. However, this study is not the final suggestion. More research in other aspects of learning strategies such as factors affecting strategy choice, cultural experiences toward learning strategies, and previous educational background with learning strategies (Oxford, 1994) would be beneficial.

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