FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND STUDY SKILLS AMONG INDONESIAN AND THAI GRADUATE STUDENTS OF EDUCATION STUDIES

Riswanda Setiadi
Indonesia University of Education (UPI)
riswandasetiadi@gmail.com

Araya Piyakun
Mahasarakham University
sendr_p@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The research was aimed at identifying Indonesian and Thai graduate students' competence in foreign language, English or other foreign languages, describing their study skills by documenting their foreign language learning strategies, and documenting ways they use their competence in English or other foreign languages to facilitate their learning processes. Participants of the study possess different foreign language skills other than English. Some Indonesia students can speak French and Japanese, and Thai students are able to Chinese and Laos. However, their foreign language skills are mostly poor. Only a few students claimed that they were good foreign language speakers. It is believed that when individuals do not practice their foreign language skills frequently, they will lose their skills acquisition as they are not able to keep their language knowledge in their memory. In terms of language use, they speak foreign language(s) for academic, professional, economic, and cultural purposes. In sum, both Indonesian and Thai graduate students are mostly classified into receptive type of learners as they tend to improve receptive language skills rather than productive ones because for their academic purposes, they only need to read and listen. It is recommended that the students improve their academic writing skills.

Keywords: *foreign language proficiency, learner types, language acquisition*

INTRODUCTION

It is common that foreign languages, especially English, are used as a medium of communication for various purposes. In international relations, foreign languages play crucial roles which enable different people to understand each other. In many countries where international languages such as English, French, Arabic, Spanish or Chinese are not spoken, learning those languages have become academic affairs. In academic sphere, English in particular and other foreign language are not only a disciplinary subject at different educational levels, but a lingua franca as well to achieve academic goals since literature and teaching materials are written in this language. For non-English speakers, speaking and using English requires individuals to learn it at formal or non-formal education settings. Therefore, sometimes foreign language acquisition becomes a very hard struggle for some or many people.

A particular phenomenon related to foreign language acquisition can be seen at tertiary education level in Indonesia in particular. Studying international or foreign languages constitutes a choice for students to develop their academic, linguistic and intellectual capacity, and to pursue socio-cultural, economic or professional goals. Furthermore, they are studied and analyzed in many respects. In other words, people learn those languages, learn about them, and

learn through them. It is indeed believed that graduates with foreign language skills face exciting employment opportunities given increased demand for such skills in the global market.

As a developing country, Indonesia adopts an education system which encourages people to learn and study foreign languages in order to communicate with other peoples and understand their cultures. Many other developing countries develop similar policies in their education system. Thailand is one of those countries that apply an education system which includes foreign language learning into its curriculum. Indonesian and Thai people do not speak international languages used in international communities or bodies such as United Nations. Exposure to the international languages in both countries only belongs to those who study them or who have chances to communicate with people from different nationalities. English is a dominant international language spoken in various areas in both countries. One of interesting phenomena to which many people pay attention is using English to develop study skills, and this phenomenon can be found in learning processes among graduate students who do not major in English or any other foreign languages. They have to develop their study skills by acquiring English in particular as they read literature and instructional materials in English. Frankly speaking, most of textbooks intended for graduate students in Indonesia and Thailand are written in English. It is the reason why some students, if not all, at graduate education level deal with an extra burden in completing their study.

Indonesia University of Education located in Bandung Indonesia and Mahasarakham University in Thailand share a similar circumstance where graduate students who do not major in English or other foreign languages are required to master foreign language skills due to the above mentioned reason. At Indonesia University of Education for instance, graduate students

have to achieve at least 450 TOEFL score as the evidence of their English language acquisition. They have to present an English language proficiency certificate to Graduate School at the end of first semester. When they are able to show this evidence, they are allowed to submit their thesis for final examination. This requirement proves that English is not only a foreign language but also an academic language. However, how they make use of it to facilitate their study is still a question because they in fact speak Indonesian as instructional medium. Up to now, not much effort has been made to document this dilemmatic situation. It is why this research is worth considering and conducting.

The research was aimed at identifying Indonesian and Thai graduate students' competence in foreign language, English or other foreign languages, describing their study skills by documenting their foreign language learning strategies, and documenting ways they use their competence in English or other foreign languages to facilitate their learning processes. Furthermore, the research has been expected to provide data and information about (1) foreign language proficiency among Indonesian and Thai graduate students who do not major in English or other foreign languages; (2) how the students develop study skills by making use of English or other foreign languages; (3) how they use English or other foreign languages for academic purposes; and (4) possible strategies or policies which can be developed by Indonesia University of Education and Mahasarakham University or other universities which offer graduate programs both in Indonesia and Thailand to help the students improve their foreign language competence. In addition, it is expected to encourage other researchers to conduct further joint research at international level on the foreign language skills or other fields of study.

METHOD

In line with its purposes, the research adopted a descriptive method to describe current state of Indonesian and Thai graduate students' foreign language proficiency and study skills. To collect data on graduate students' foreign language proficiency and study skills, questionnaire and interview will be conducted. Questionnaire will contain questions regarding students' proficiency in one or more foreign languages, foreign language learning experiences, frequency of foreign language use, the acquisition of foreign language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and learning strategies in relation to the use of foreign language. Meanwhile, interview will focus on study burden in relation to learning materials written in foreign language, attempts made to handle foreign language difficulties (if any), development of foreign language skills, the contributions of foreign language skills to the selection of appropriate study skills, and acceleration of academic task completion.

Research samples were randomly selected from graduate students of education studies who have completed the third semester of their study period at Indonesia University of Education (UPI) and Mahasarakham University (MU) Thailand. They are 73 UPI and 60 MU graduate students who are not majoring in English or other foreign language studies. A manageable size of samples was set to make this research workable and attain accountable validity.

THEORETICAL REVIEW
Foreign Language Learning Theories and Models

To fully understand how a foreign language is acquired and learned, it is necessary to take into some theoretical perspectives. Literature describes a number of foreign language learning theories and models. Freeman & Freeman (1996), Willis & Willis (1996), Brown (2000), and Scovel (2001) proposed those theories and models in different ways. Based on their work, there are three general classifications which cover foreign language learning theories and models: innatist, cognitive, and constructivist. However, it is necessary to emphasize that in general a theory results in a model. Therefore, theories and models share the same names.

a. Innatist Model

Stephen Krashen is one of experts who has written various articles on foreign language acquisition and proposed five hypotheses: (1) The Acquisition- Learning Hypothesis, (2) The Monitor Hypothesis, (3) The Natural Order Hypothesis, (4) The Input Hypothesis, and (5) The Affective Filter Hypothesis.

In his first hypothesis, Krashen (1997) states that adult learners of a foreign language adopt two ways of mastering a target language: acquisition and learning. Foreign language fluency, according to him, is achieved through an acquisition process, rather than learning process. Acquisition is more dominant than learning, and both processes are separate. The second hypothesis suggests that learning involves the process of monitoring (correction), and learners are aware of this process. The third hypothesis states individuals master language rules naturally (unpredicted). The fourth hypothesis contends that foreign language learning processes occur when learners understand language inputs slightly higher than their language competence. The final hypothesis mentions that language acquisition will occur in an environment where learners have low anxiety or affective filter.

Considering those five hypotheses, we can conclude that language input is a crucial source for foreign language learning. However, learner competence and learner involvement in interactional processes of acquisition and learning are not taken into account.

b. Cognitive Model

Among other experts, there are two writers who have made significant contributions to the development of cognitive model: Barry McLaughlin and Ellen Bialystok. McLaughlin (1987, 1990) proposed Attention-Processing Model, which puts emphasis on the control and automatic information processing mechanism. Control process involves limited and temporary capacity and competence, while automatic mechanism includes wider and more complex processes.

Meanwhile, Bialystok (1990) put forward Explicit and Implicit Model. Explicit knowledge is a fact of an individual's linguistic knowledge and competence to present the fact in certain ways, while implicit knowledge is information automatically and spontaneously used in language communication. In this model, cognitive ability is the key to successful foreign language learning.

c. Constructivist Model

Figure behind this model is mainly Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, who presented Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory. ZPD is a potential distance between learner's independent learning and more capable adult' assistance in learning processes (Ruddell & Ruddell, 1996). In terma of foreign language learning, Michael Long adalah is a constructivist who has presented ideas of how foreign language is acquired or learned in social context. In Long's perspective (1996), interation and language input are two major factors in foreign language acquisition process.

With the emphasis on social interaction, we can conclude that classroom is not only a place to develop language skills, but also a setting for learners to interact with each other and make interaction a language acquisition facilitator.

2. Practical implications for foreign language learning

Considering the above mentioned theories, there are a few practical implications teachers and learners should take into account in their language learning processes. Those implications are: (1) teacher and learner should consider various variables which lead to foreign language learning complexity; (2) language instruction should focus on acquisition process or at least balance acquition and learning processes; (3) foreign language learning is also foreign culture learning; (4) learning is a process of dialog and interaction; and (5) personal, cognitive, and social components when combined will be very important sources of successfull foreign language learning processes.

Study Skills

In many ways, study skills are similar to learning strategies. A skill or strategy is closely related to metacognitive, cognitive, and socioaffective aspects (Nunan, 1999). At higher level of education, study skills cover the following skills: (1) understanding syntax, (2) recognizing and interpreting cohesive devices, (3) interpreting discourse markers, (4) recognizing functional value, (5) recognizing the presuppositions underlying the text, (6) recognizing implications and making inferences, (7) recognizing rhetorical structure, and (8) prediction (Nuttall, 1996). Based on this conception, it can be concluded that study skills and reading skills are interchangeable. For the purpose of this study, study skills will be connected with reading skills or reading strategies.

However, study skills are not only concerned with written language, but spoken language as well. In the context of higher level learning in particular, there is one thing to consider that oral process, speakers or readers should be in interaction. In writing process, writers do not need to directly interact with their readers. It is therefore necessary to re-emphasize that "in many ways there is a close relationship between speech and writing because both are a crucial part of language competence and support each other (Winch,

Speech	Writing
1. Takes place in a context, which often makes references clear (e.g. 'that thing over there')	1. Creates its own context and therefore has to be fully explicitly.
2. Speaker and listener(s) in contact. Interact and exchange roles.	2. Reader not present and no interaction possible.
3. Usually person addressed is specific.	3. Reader not necessary known to writer.
4. Immediate feedback given and expected: (a) verbal: questions, comments.., murmurs, grunts; and (b) non-verbal: facial expressions	4. No immediate feedback possible. Writer may try to anticipate reader's reactions and incorporate them into text.
5. Speech is transitory. Intended to be understood immediately. If not, listener expected to react.	5. Writing is permanent. Can be reread as often as necessary and at own speed.
6. Sentences often incomplete and sometimes ungrammatical. Hesitations and pauses common and usually some redundancy and repetition.	6. Sentences expected to be carefully constructed, and linked and organized to form a text.
Range of devices (stress, intonation, pitch, speed) to help convey meaning. Facial expression, body movements and gestures also used for this purpose.	Devices to help convey meaning are punctuation, capitals and underlining (for emphasis). Sentence boundaries clearly indicated.

et.al. 2001)". In particular, Byrne (1988, 3) presents differences between spoken and written language.

In the final analysis, it can be convinced that when students are able to manage and manipulate those skills for their academic purposes, they will result in high quality learning outcomes. As mentioned above, however, study skills are closely related to reading activities. In many respects, the use of foreign language by graduate students involves reading activities since the students are frequently exposed to literature written in foreign languages, especially English.

In many ways, there is a close relationship between speech and writing because they are a crucial part of language competence and support each other (Winch, et.al. 2001). "Written language is organized differently from spoken language, and the world as seen in writing is different from the world as heard in speech" (p. 151). A comparison between speech and writing can help us understand some of the difficulties we experience when we write. Like the reading process, writing also involves a variety of factors that influence its smooth flow. According to Byrne (1988), there are three factors that cause writing difficult: psychological, linguistic, and cognitive.

Specifically, Winch, et. al. (2001) suggested that feelings and emotions are crucial factors to the writing process because they act as driving forces during the writing process.

In general, graduate students deal with academic writing tasks to prove their writing skills in various forms of academic work. They write paper or research paper to meet academic requirements set by their lecturers. Therefore, their writing activities are mainly academic in nature. This research slightly focused on academic writing activities carried out by the graduate students of education studies in Indonesia and Thailand as their academic tasks mainly require them to read and completed in their national language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Foreign language proficiency

Data show that graduate students who got involved in the study possess different foreign language skills other than English. Some Indonesia students can speak French and Japanese, and Thai students are able to Chinese and Laos. However, their foreign language skills are mostly poor. Only a few students claimed that they were good foreign language speakers. It is believed that when individuals do not practice their foreign language skills frequently, they will lose their

skills acquisition as they are not able to keep their language knowledge in their memory. It is a common phenomenon in the language acquisition. Furthermore, most of the students are not foreign language learners because they do not study any foreign language for their academic purposes. That is why most of them only acquired foreign language skills at a superficial level. Considering this situation, Innatist model is appropriate to describe why the students' foreign language competences are mostly poor. However, most of the students believed that they were fairly good English speakers.

In terms of language use, they speak foreign language(s) for academic, professional, economic, and cultural purposes. Foreign language use is closely related to the efforts to improve their learning outcomes. In this case, they usually take the following strategies (a) note taking, (b) asking questions, (c) reading more books, (d) discussion with fellow students, and (e) brainstorm with more capable colleagues. When practicing a foreign language, they mostly read, speak and listen so it can be assumed that they are possibly good readers in foreign language. However, they also admitted that vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and semantics are common difficult obstacles in their foreign language learning.

At graduate level, foreign language learning for academic purposes much depends on instructional setting and learning tasks given by the lecturers, and understandability is the most important thing to the students. As most students are not exposed to foreign language communities, they tend to show a positive attitude toward the foreign language to keep them familiar with it. Although ten to thirty per cent of books are written in foreign languages, mostly in English, it has not enabled them to use any foreign language fluently and accurately. Therefore, they make a variety of efforts to improve their foreign language acquisition, such as memorization, translation, and asking questions.

Foreign language and literacy activities

As mentioned above, up to 30% of learning materials are mostly written in English. So using those materials is barely avoidable to the graduate students. In addition to academic activities in mother tongue or national language, sometimes they have an occasion to use a foreign language the academic purposes. They claimed that they had to write from one to ten papers in a foreign language, mostly English, during their study period, but data show that they read only a few foreign books during their study. In fact, Indonesian and Thai students spend much time reading printed materials written in their national language as it is much easier to understand them, and publication has been improving in both countries.

In literacy activities, the subjects have spent much more time reading and writing as they did not have opportunities to communicate with native speakers for academic purposes. In reading activities, they cope with reading difficulties by considering such textual components as vocabulary, sentences, or lexical clues and consulting dictionary. For the sake of better reading comprehension, they adopt the following strategies: (a) using a variety of senses, (b) making connections, (c) analyzing text structure, (d) recognizing words and understanding sentences, and read the text repeatedly. When they have to write a course assignment in foreign language, they tend to write a descriptive genre. Like reading activities, they also face a similar problem with grammatical components.

Foreign language learning styles

Considering the ways the students learn to improve their foreign language skills, they can be classified into different categories of learner style. Both Indonesian and Thai graduate students share similar characteristics, and belong to visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, field-independent, field-dependent, reflective, and impulsive types of

learners. Approximately 65% of the subjects are visual learners because they usually enjoy reading and tend to recognize the words they read. To help them understand more what they read, they like to learn by looking at pictures or illustrations. When they prefer to learn by listening, they are auditory learners and enjoy spoken language and conversations. About fourteen per cent of the students are categorized into this type of learner. The rest of students belong to the field-independent, field-dependent, reflective, and impulsive types. Seven per cent of them are field-independent as they focus on the language details, such as grammatical rules and pay attention to words and sentences. Nine per cent are field-dependent because they do not like care about rules. They think that transmitting messages and conveying ideas is more important than obeying language rules. Among the students, only three per cent take into account language rules and ways of presenting messages accurately. In this case, they think very carefully about how to use language and avoid to make mistakes. Finally, there are also some students, about two per cent, who are categorized into impulsive learners. They take any chance and even risk to use language, and do not worry about making mistakes. The most important thing for them is to communicate fluently.

In sum, both Indonesian and Thai graduate students are mostly classified into receptive type of learners. It is understandable that they tend to improve receptive language skills rather than productive ones because for their academic purposes, they only need to read and listen. Under this circumstance, speaking and writing skills are seemingly secondary to them. Hence, study skills they develop during their graduate study would mostly depend on those receptive competences.

CONCLUSIONS

In addition to a few differences, the UPI and MU graduate students share many similarities in foreign language proficiency and study skills as identified by categories. When considering the linguistic and sociocultural background, it is no wonder why they presented similar characteristics. In most cases, they spend much time performing academic tasks spoken or written in their national language. Furthermore, they are apparently in similar types of learners so it can be easily predicted that they have acquired the same categories of study skills. Taking into account the foreign language learning theories, the most appropriate theory describing the phenomenon found among the Indonesian and Thai graduate students is Innatist theory (Krashen, 1997) as it suggests that adult learners of a foreign language adopt two ways of mastering a target language: acquisition and learning. Foreign language fluency, according to him, is achieved through an acquisition process, rather than learning process. Acquisition is more dominant than learning, and both processes are separate. The second hypothesis suggests that learning involves the process of monitoring (correction), and learners are aware of this process. The third hypothesis states individuals master language rules naturally (unpredicted). The fourth hypothesis contends that foreign language learning processes occur when learners understand language inputs slightly higher than their language competence. The final hypothesis mentions that language acquisition will occur in an environment where learners have low anxiety or affective filter. This exactly has happened to the participants of this study.

As verbal communication for academic purposes is rarely carried out, the students focus more receptive language skills, reading and listening, than productive ones to acquire the foreign language(s). This way enables them to search for textual and contextual clues when they try to communicate their ideas and thoughts and academic settings. It is barely possible to push them to make use of the foreign

language(s) in native speakers' ways. Hence, the acquisition of foreign language skills in the case of Indonesia and Thailand is not a major determinant to mastering good study skills. However, when the students are able to manage and manipulate those skills for their academic purposes, they will result in high quality learning outcomes.

REFERENCES

Bernhardt, E.B. (1991). *Reading development in a second language: theoretical, empirical, and classroom practices*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Company.

Blachowicz, C., & Ogle, D. (2001). *Reading comprehension: strategies for independent learners*. New York: Guilford Press.

Brown, James Dean. (1988). *Understanding Research in Second Language Learning: A teacher's guide to statistics and research design*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Burnes, D. & Page, Glenda. (1985). *Insights and strategies for teaching reading*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Byrne, D.1988. *Teaching Writing Skills* London: Longmann, MA.

Campbell, R., Green, D., & Rivalland, J. (2003). Children and print: writing. In

Green, D., & Campbell, R. (Eds.), *Literacies & Learners: Current Perspectives*. New South Wales, Australia: Prentice Hall.

Dean, Geoff. 2000. *Teaching Reading in Secondary Schools*. London: David Fultin Publishers, Ltd.

Dechant, E.V. (1970). *Improving the Teaching of Reading*. Second Edition New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Downing, J., & Leong, C.K. (1982). *Psychology of Reading*. New York: McmillanPublishing Co., Inc.

Freeman, D.E., & Freeman, Y.S. (1994). *Between Worlds: Access to Second Language Acquisition*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading The Word and The World*.

Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc.

Gee, J.P. 1986. *What is Literacy?*. Conference Paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Goodman, K. (1986). *What's Whole in Whole Language?* New York: Scholastic Inc.

Haberlandt, Karl. 1997. *Cognitive Psychology*. 2nd Edition. Allyn & Bacon, Needham Heights, MA.

Hannon, P. (2000). *Reflecting on Literacy in Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Hillerich, R.L. (1983). *The Principal's Guide to Improving Reading Instruction*.

Massachusetts, Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Hong Kong: Newbury House.

Nuttall, C. (1996). Teaching reading skills in a foreign language. Oxford, UK: Macmillan Heinemmann.

Otto, W., Peters, C.W., & Peters, N. (1977). *Reading Problems: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Page, W.D., & Pinnell, G.S. (1979). *Teaching reading comprehension: theory and practice*. Urbana III: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, National Institute of Education.

Ruddell R.B., Rudell M.Rapp, & Singer, Harry (Eds). 1994. *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*. 4th Edition. International Reading Association, Newark, Delaware USA.

Ruddell, R.B. & Ruddell, M.R. 1996. *Teaching Children to Read and Write: Becoming an Influential Teacher*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Smith, F. (1985). *Reading*. Second Edition. Melbourne: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

Stanovich, K.E. (1991). Word Recognition: Changing Perspectives. In Barr, R.,

Kamil, M.L., Mosenthal, P., & Pearson, P.D. (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research*. Volume II. New York: Longman

Publishing Group.

Tierney, R.J., Readence, J.E., & Dishner, E.K. (1995). *Readinge strategies and practices: A Compandium*. 4ᵗʰ Ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Urquhart, A.H., & Weir, C.J. (1998). *Reading in Second Language: Process, Product, and Practice*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

Vermont Institutes. 2008. *Vermont Strategic Reading Initiative*. http://vermontinstitutes.org/vsri/strategies.html

Weaver, C. (1988). *Reading Process and Practice: From Socio-Psycholinguistic to Whole Language*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Weaver, Constance. 1994. *Reading Process and Practice: From Socio-Psychological to Whole Language*. Porthsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Winch, G., Johnson, R.R., Holliday, M & Ljunhdahl, L. 2001. *Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Children's Literature*. Australia: Oxford University Press.

Zintz, M.V. (1978). *The Reading Process: the teacher and the learner*. Second Edition. Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers.