

## A SUCCESSFUL AND AN UNSUCCESSFUL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER: A CASE STUDY

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Received:</b> 20/02/2023</p> <p><b>Revised:</b> 23/3/2023</p> <p><b>Published:</b> 23/3/2023</p>	<p>The study aims to identify the factors affecting success and failure in language learning of successful and unsuccessful learners and investigate their learning strategies. The subjects of the study were two students at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. Three data collection instruments, namely a questionnaire, an individual face-to-face interview and an MI test were used. The study indicates that the factors such as motivation, multiple intelligences and learning conditions had strong influences on the two learners' learning. The questionnaire reveals that the successful learner used learning strategies much more than the unsuccessful learner. The information about learner's motivation was collected by carrying out a face-to-face interview. While the successful learner was motivated by her family, her love for English, and her future job, the unsuccessful learner exhibited much less motivation. The information about multiple intelligences was collected by asking the two learners to take an MI test. The finding is that multiple intelligence was one of the factors affecting the successful learner's success and the unsuccessful learner's failure (The successful learner's verbal/ linguistic intelligence was 100% while the unsuccessful learner's was only 10%).</p>
<b>KEYWORDS</b>	
Case study	
Successful and unsuccessful learner	
Language learning strategy	
Learning motivation	
Multiple intelligences	

## NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP VỀ NGƯỜI HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ THÀNH CÔNG VÀ KHÔNG THÀNH CÔNG

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Trường Ngoại ngữ - ĐH Thái Nguyên

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
<p><b>Ngày nhận bài:</b> 20/02/2023</p> <p><b>Ngày hoàn thiện:</b> 23/3/2023</p> <p><b>Ngày đăng:</b> 23/3/2023</p>	<p>Nghiên cứu nhằm mục đích xác định các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến sự thành công và thất bại trong việc học ngôn ngữ của người học thành công và không thành công và khảo sát các chiến lược học tập của họ. Đối tượng nghiên cứu là hai sinh viên Trường Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Thái Nguyên. Ba công cụ thu thập dữ liệu được sử dụng: bảng câu hỏi, phỏng vấn trực tiếp và bài kiểm tra về đa trí tuệ. Nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng các yếu tố như động lực học, đa trí tuệ và điều kiện học tập có ảnh hưởng lớn đến việc học tập của cả hai người học. Kết quả câu hỏi khảo sát cho thấy người học thành công sử dụng chiến lược học tập nhiều hơn người học không thành công. Thông tin về động lực của người học được thu thập bằng cách phỏng vấn trực tiếp. Trong khi người học thành công được thúc đẩy bởi gia đình, sự yêu thích tiếng Anh và công việc tương lai, thì người học không thành công lại thể hiện ít động lực hơn nhiều. Thông tin về đa trí tuệ được thu thập bằng cách yêu cầu hai người học làm bài kiểm tra MI. Kết quả cho thấy đa trí tuệ là một trong những yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến thành công của người học thành công và thất bại của người học không thành công (Trí thông minh ngôn ngữ/lời nói của người học thành công là 100% trong khi của người học không thành công chỉ là 10%).</p>
<b>TỪ KHÓA</b>	
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Người học thành công và người học không thành công	
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## 1. Introduction

With the advent of globalization, the popularity of English has been increasing in recent decades. English is considered the international language and mainly used in education, commerce, aviation, and other fields. Rao [1] stresses the popularity of English by comparing the English language to blood in the veins of nation worldwide. According to Nishanthi [2], English is the greatest common language spoken universally. While many researchers are trying to find out effective teaching methods to help students master the language, others have been making learners the centre of their concern. Therefore, characteristics, learning style, learning strategies and multiple intelligences of successful or good language learners have been investigated. Sun [3] and Khasinah [4] indicated motivation, attitude, age, intelligence, aptitude, personality as the factors that affect second language acquisition. Rubin [5] and Stern [6], for example, focuses on the techniques and approaches which are used by the good language learners in enhancing their language ability. Macleod [7] compares and classifies learning strategies used by two successful learners. Rubin and Thompson [8] believe that a successful language learner possesses some of the 14 characteristics. Successful language learners (1) find their own way, take responsibility for their own learning; (2) organize information about the language and their own program of study; (3) are creative, and try to feel the language by experimenting its grammar and words; (4) create their own opportunities to practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom; (5) learn to live with uncertainty by not getting confused and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word; (6) use memory strategies to bring back what has been learned; (7) make errors work for them and not against them (don't stop talking for fear of errors); (8) use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language; (9) use contextual cues to help them in comprehension; (10) learn to make intelligent guesses; (11) learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform "beyond their competence"; (12) learn to use certain tricks to keep conversations going; (13) learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence; (14) learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language regarding the formality of the situation. Additionally, Liando [9] pointed out that family members, teachers and individuals play important roles in the success of a language learner. However, the differences between the characteristics, strategies and other factors between good and poor learners have not been popularly examined. Consequently, this study focuses on the comparison between a successful and an unsuccessful English learner.

The study is aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What are the factors that affect the success and failure in language learning of successful and unsuccessful English learners?
2. What are the language learning strategies employed by the two kinds of learners?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The first participant was student A (SV A), a fourth-year English major student at the School of Foreign Languages (successful learner). She is from a rich family in Thai Nguyen city, so she has enjoyed good living and learning conditions since a very young age. She started learning English at the age of six when she was in primary school. According to her, she has loved English very much since her very first lessons. She learned at Chu Van An secondary school and Thai Nguyen high school for gifted students. Since she was at secondary school, she has chosen English to be her major, so she was in English major class in both high school and secondary school. Besides, she joined many English courses at the Language center with native teachers. These courses brought her opportunities to take part in useful extracurricular activities such as language camps, English presentation competitions which benefited her in improving English and enhancing confidence. At the university, she is now known as one of the best students with good

study results in most subjects, especially the subjects of English major. Her good English ability is proved with mark 7.5 in the IELTS test, organized by IDP when she was a third-year student. When she was a second-year student, she won a scholarship rewarded by Fulbright Programme and she had a chance to learn English in a university in the USA for six months. After studying abroad, her English now is much better than before especially her English speaking ability.

The second participant is student B (SV B), who is a fourth-year student at School of Foreign Languages (unsuccessful learner). She is from Meo ethnic group, Dong Van, Ha Giang province. It was not until her years at secondary school that she had chances to learn English. From the beginning, English was terrible to her because it was her third language after Tay language and Vietnamese. At her school, English was not an important subject, so she had no more than two hours to learn English at secondary school. She was mostly taught grammar and vocabulary at school. After high school, she was forced to choose English to be her major at university by her parents because they thought it would be easier for her to get a job. She did not pass the entrance exam, but because of the huge lack of teacher of English in her province, she was sent to Thai Nguyen University to study English with a condition that she must work as a teacher of English in any assigned schools in Ha Giang province after graduating from university. When she was at the university, she was always one of the weakest students in her class. She had to retake many exams. Although her friends, her teachers helped her a lot, she could not get better and her interest in English could not be raised. In the previous year, she was in the list of the students who were in danger of being kicked out of the school. After more than four years studying at university, she got only mark 4.0 in the IELTS test while the requirement for last year student is 6.5.

## **2.2. Data collection instruments**

Three data collection instruments, namely a questionnaire, an individual face-to-face interview and an MI test were used in this study. The first instrument, the survey questionnaire about learning strategies based on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) for second language learners created by Oxford [10] was adopted by the researcher. This information would help the researcher to find out what strategies the two learners used to learn English. Salkin [11] considered questionnaire a useful tool in educational research because it is easy for the participant to complete without the help from the researcher. The second instrument was individual face-to-face interview which is about participants' personality and motivation for learning English. According to Kvale [12], interviews allow deeper exploration of the topic because interviewer can get more details in particular questions. The third instrument, the MI test based on Gardner's [13] theory about multiple intelligences theory was adapted from the website [www.mypersonality.info](http://www.mypersonality.info) (retrieved on 10th December, 2022). The test was used to investigate the two learners' multiple intelligences.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### **3.1. Analysis of learner's characteristics and discussion**

#### **3.1.1. Motivation**

After interviewing the two learners, a number of differences about motivation between them were found. SV A said "I had chance to get familiar with English when I was at the kindergarten. My teacher sometimes let us watch videos of English songs for children. I did not understand the meaning of the songs, but I loved the melody and the music. Then I tried to imitate the songs". However, SV B said "I started learning English when I was at secondary school. I've hated English since the first lesson." It is clear that English has been something very interesting to SV A since her young age. In contrast, English has been a nightmare to SV B. It is a fact that when a person has positive attitude about the language, he/ she will learn it more easily and much better. Another difference about motivation between the two learners is the reason they chose English to be their major at university. SV A decided to take the English entrance exam because she has strong passion of English. Her elder brother, who is working in Thai Nguyen television as a

translator, can earn a lot of money. Therefore, she believes that English will be a good tool which helps her get a good job in the future and make a lot money like her brother. Nevertheless, SV B loved mathematics, but was always forced to learn English by her parents because in her hometown there were more opportunities to get a job as a teacher of English. Additionally, the study result at the university of SV A and SV B was opposite. While SV A always got mark A in most subjects, SV B normally got mark C, D and had to retake many exams. Again, motivation is the explanation for this difference. When being asked the question “What motivates you to learn?” SV A said “my learning motivation is my good job in the future and a foreign scholarship”. However, SV B said “I had no learning motivation because I hate English and I do not have to worry about my future job. I was sent here to study by my province, so I will have a job as a teacher of English after I graduate from university.” SV A took the university entrance exam and passed by herself. She always reminds herself that the better she studies, the more opportunities to get a good job she has. Moreover, good study result was one of the criteria for her to apply a scholarship to study abroad, so she tried her best in her study. SV B, on the contrary, is a student sent to university by her province which assures that she will have a job after graduating from university no matter how her result is good or bad. This is the reason why she does not worry about her study result like SV A and many other students.

### 3.1.2. MI test result and discussion

**Table 1.** MI test result of SV A and SV B

<b>Intelligences</b>	<b>SV A (%)</b>	<b>SV B (%)</b>
Verbal/ Linguistic	100	10
Interpersonal	90	10
Intrapersonal	80	30
Naturalist	65	15
Visual/ Spatial	65	35
Musical	65	15
Bodily/ Kinesthetic	35	70
Logical/ Mathematical	25	90

Based on the result of the MI tests of the two learners, multiple intelligence was found to be another reason of the success and failure in their language learning. According to the MI test results (see table 1), SV A's verbal/ linguistic intelligence accounted for 100%. According to Gardner's theory about multiple intelligences, the people who get high percentage of verbal/ linguistic will be probably good at words and languages, written and spoken retention, interpretation and explanation of ideas and information via languages. This is the reason why she is really into learning languages in general and English in particular. Additionally, in the interview, she said that she was really good at literature when she was at high school and she got mark 8.5 for literature in her entrance exam. Her MI test result is a good explanation for this. Moreover, her interpersonal intelligence was 90 % which means that she has good ability to relate to others, interpret behavior and communications and understand the relationships between people and their situations. This result explained her interest in participating in extra-curricular activities such as English clubs, language camps.

SV B's result of the MI test completely contrasted with SV A's. Her logical/ mathematical intelligence was 90% which means that she is good at logical thinking, detecting patterns, analyzing problems, performing mathematical calculations. In contrast, her verbal/ linguistic and interpersonal intelligence was only 10%. As stated above, SV B loves maths and the subject related to calculating. She always has difficulty expressing ideas and communicating people. She hates the subjects such as languages, literature and history. Her MI test result would be one of the reasons for her failure in language learning.

### 3.2. Analysis of learning conditions and discussion

The information collected from the interview shows that learning condition was another factor influencing language learning result of the two learners. SV A seemed to be much luckier because

she has enjoyed very good learning conditions since her childhood. She started learning English when she was six years old. She went to Nguyen Viet Xuan primary school which is one of the best primary schools in Thai Nguyen city and is famous for high-qualified teachers. The school is equipped with modern facilities such as projectors, radios and computers. Therefore, since her first lessons, she has had opportunities to learn with authentic English materials such as CDs and English cartoons which benefited her a lot in acquiring English. Moreover, at high school and secondary school she was in gifted class in English, so she was taught four English skills (listening, speaking, writing and reading) along with grammar and vocabulary. Her teacher used different teaching methods to help students understand the lessons. Beside formal education at school, she joined many English courses and activities organized by foreign teachers at language centers. Because she lives in the city, she can find many useful materials in English such as magazines, newspapers and books. Moreover, thanks to her scholarship, she learned in the U.S. for six months, which gave her valuable experiences and good chances to practice and improve her English. It is clear that favorable learning conditions made great contribution to SV A's success.

SV B is not as lucky as SV A because she did not know about English until her years at secondary school. She is from one of the most remote and difficult areas of the country, Dong Van, Ha Giang. While English was considered the most important subject in SV A's class, it was an unimportant subject at SV B's. During the four years at secondary school and three years at high school, she had grammar and vocabulary lessons only. Her teachers of English rarely spoke English during English lessons and usually skipped listening and speaking lessons because these English skills were not included in exams. Except for three hours per week learning English at school, she did not have any other opportunities to learn and practice English. It was not until the first lesson at the university, SV B started to know about authentic materials such as CDs, books and magazines. Compared to SV A and other students in her class, her learning conditions were much worse.

### 3.3. Learning strategies

#### 3.3.1. Result of learning strategy survey

**Table 2.** The results of Memory strategy on SILL (Full score is 5)

Part A – Memory strategy	SV A	SV B
1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in the SL (second language).	4	2
2. I use new SL words in a sentence so I can remember them.	5	2
3. I connect the sound of a new SL word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	3	3
4. I remember a new SL word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	4	3
5. I use rhymes to remember new SL words.	2	2
6. I use flashcards to remember new SL words.	4	2
7. I physically act out new SL words.	4	1
8. I review SL lessons often	5	1
9. I remember new SL words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	4	2
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.88</b>	<b>2.0</b>

Table 2 shows memory strategy which includes nine sub-strategies. It is revealed from the result that the two learners used the strategy differently. SV A's average score was 3.88 while SV B's average score was only 2.0. Because their interest in English was different, SV A always reviewed the English lesson and used English words by putting them in sentences, but SV B never did this. SV A usually memorized English by thinking about the relationship between the new thing and what she had known, relating to the context in which the words might be used, remembering location on pages, on the board or street sign while SV B rarely used these strategies.

**Table 3.** *The result of cognitive strategy on SILL (Full score is 5)*

<b>Part B – Cognitive strategy</b>	<b>SV A</b>	<b>SV B</b>
1. I say or write new SL words several times.	4	2
2. I try to talk like native SL speakers.	5	2
3. I practice the sounds of SL.	5	3
4. I use the SL words I know in different ways.	4	3
5. I start conversations in the SL.	5	2
6. I watch SL language TV shows spoken in SL or go to movies spoken in SL.	5	2
7. I read for pleasure in the SL.	4	1
8. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in the SL.	5	2
9. I first skim an SL passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	4	2
10. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in the SL.	4	3
11. I try to find patterns in the SL.	3	3
12. I find the meaning of an SL word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	3	3
13. I try not to translate word for word.	4	2
14. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in the SL.	4	2
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.92</b>	<b>2.28</b>

Table 3 illustrates the result of cognitive strategy including fourteen sub-strategies. Compared to the use of memory strategy, the differences in cognitive strategy employment was slightly reduced, but the average score shows that SV A used the cognitive strategy much more often than SV B. While most of cognitive strategies were always used by SV A, only some of them were employed by SV B (looking for similar words in her own language, trying to find pattern in SL, finding the meaning of a new word by dividing it into parts).

**Table 4.** *The results of compensation strategy on SILL*

<b>Part C – Compensation strategy</b>	<b>SV A</b>	<b>SV B</b>
1. To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses.	4	2
2. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures.	5	3
3. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL	4	2
4. I read SL without looking up every new word.	5	2
5. I try to guess what the other person will say next in the SL.	4	3
6. If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	5	2
<b>Mean</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>2.3</b>

Compensation strategy with six sub-strategies is shown in table 4. Again, SV A was the person who used the types of strategy more than SV B. SV A always employed some types of strategy such as using gestures to express unknown words, reading without looking up every new word, using similar words or phrases if she could not think of an SL word. SV B, on the contrary, never used these types of strategy. The types of strategy sometimes used by SV B are using gesture to express unknown word in conversation and guessing what people say next in SL.

**Table 5.** *The result of metacognitive on SILL (full score is 5)*

<b>Part D – Metacognitive strategy</b>	<b>SV A</b>	<b>SV B</b>
1. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my SL.	4	2
2. I notice my SL mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	3	3
3. I pay attention when someone is speaking SL.	4	3
4. I try to find out how to be a better learner of SL	5	1
5. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study SL	5	2
6. I look for people I can talk to in SL.	5	2
7. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in SL.	5	2
8. I have clear goals for improving my SL skills.	5	2
9. I think about my progress in learning SL.	4	2
<b>Mean</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>2.1</b>

Table 5 shows metacognitive including nine sub-strategies. With the average score of 4.4, SV A always used most of the types of strategy while SV B rarely used most of them except for using her noticed mistakes to help her do better and paying attention when someone speaks SL. The characteristics of the two learners would be a good explanation for this. SV A loved English and had great motivation for learning English, so she always tried to be a better learner of English. In addition, she found as many ways as possible to improve her English such as reading magazines and newspaper in English, talking to foreigners through Skype and Facebook. SV B, however, was forced to learn English, so she never thought of how to get better in learning English.

**Table 6.** Result of affective strategy on SILL (full score is 5)

<b>Part E – Affective strategy</b>	<b>SV A</b>	<b>SV B</b>
1. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using SL.	5	5
2. I encourage myself to speak SL even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	5	3
3. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in SL.	5	4
4. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using SL.	3	3
5. I write down my feelings in a language learning dairy.	5	2
6. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning SL.	4	4
<b>Mean</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>3.5</b>

Table 6 describes the result of affective strategy which consists of six sub-strategies. SV A's average score was 4.5 and SV B's was 3.5. Compared to other strategies, the differences between this strategy use of the two learners were remarkably reduced. They both tried to relax when feeling afraid of using SL. In addition, both of them talked to someone else about how they felt when they were learning SL. Some other sub-strategies were similarly used by two learners such as giving themselves a reward or treat when doing well in SL, noticing if they were tense or nervous when studying or using SL.

**Table 7.** Results of social strategy on SILL (Full score is 5)

<b>Part E – Social strategy</b>	<b>SV A</b>	<b>SV B</b>
1. If I do not understand something in SL, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	4	4
2. I ask SL speakers to correct me when I talk.	5	2
3. I practice SL with other students.	5	2
4. I ask for help from SL speakers	4	2
5. I ask questions in SL.	5	2
6. I try to learn about the culture of SL speakers.	5	1
<b>Mean</b>	<b>4.66</b>	<b>2.16</b>

Table 7 displays the result of social strategy including six sub-strategies. This strategy was used differently by the two learners. SV A used this type of strategy much more than SV B. She always asked speakers to correct her and asked questions in SL. In addition, she also tried to learn about the culture of SL speakers and practiced SL with other students. In contrast, SV B only asked the other person to slow down or say again when she did not understand something. She never tried to learn about the culture of SL students. She rarely used other sub-strategies when learning SL.

### 3.3.2. Findings and discussion

It is clear from the result that SV A used language learning strategies much more than SV B because of differences in motivations and multiple intelligences. As stated in the introduction, there are different factors that may affect learner's choice of learning strategies. This study focused on two main factors that influence the differences in strategy choice of SV A and SV B. The first factor was the difference in motivation. SV A has strong desire to learn English, while SV B is forced to do this. Therefore, SV A had a tendency to find the best way to learn the language and she tried using different learning strategies to improve her English. This is one of the reasons why her English was much better than SV B's. On the contrary, SV B hates English and doesn't have to worry about her future job. She was satisfied with what she had done, so she

had no intention of looking for better ways to learn English. The second factor was multiple intelligences. As stated in 3.1.2 (the result of MI test), SV A's visual intelligence and musical intelligence accounted for 65% while those of SV B accounted for 35% and 15% respectively. Therefore, SV A was interested in some types of strategies such as using flashcard and rhythm to memorize words, but SV B rarely used these strategies. In addition, because of the difference in interpersonal intelligence, SV A was fond of practicing English with other people whilst SV B never did this.

#### 4. Conclusion

This case study makes effort to analyze the factors affecting the success or failure of two language learners and investigate the learning strategies used by the two learners. It is clear from the research that there are a number of different factors which affect a language learner. Therefore, it is advisable for language teachers to know and understand them and have suitable and effective application in teaching. If teachers know these factors and their effects on language learner, they can make use of the positive effects and reduce the negative ones. The study, for example, points out the effect of three factors: learning strategies, motivation, multiple intelligences. Therefore, teacher should understand what their students' motivations are to motivate them in their learning. In addition, teachers should know how they can explore their students' multiple intelligences to help them develop their language ability.

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