Strategy Use by English-Major Jordanian Undergraduates

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Research suggests that gender and perceived language proficiency level are among the factors that may impact the strategies language learners use. This study explored the impact of these variables on learning strategies used by 111 English-major Jordanian students. The instrument was Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The study revealed that females opt to use strategies more frequently than males. Results also showed that the higher the proficiency level, the more frequent the strategy use. Metacognitive strategies were the most prevalent among the different strategy types whereas memory strategies were the least deployed. These findings are discussed and implications are outlined.

Keywords: language learning strategy, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), perceived English proficiency

Learners do not necessarily handle learning in much the same way; their strategies may differ quantitatively and qualitatively. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners may consciously or unconsciously favour some strategy categories over others (e.g., Bremner, 1998; Hismanoglu, 2000; Green, & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1990; Park, 1997; Politzer, 1983; Sheorey, 1999; Wharton, 2000). This preference may extend well to individual strategies within the same category. For example, learners in a given context may favour strategy categories (e.g., memory) over others (e.g., metacognitive or social). Even within the memory category, learners may prefer creating mental linkages over applying images and sounds or reviewing well, for instance. This would not necessarily entail equal preference to all individual strategies within any of the aforementioned categories. Such variability and the factors perpetuating it have been the concern of many researchers attempting to identify commonly used and less frequently used ones as a basis towards improving students’ language learning.

There is consensus among researchers in their definition of learning strategies. For example, Rubin (1987) defined them as strategies the learner constructs to contribute in the development of the language system and, in turn, affect learning directly. In much the same way, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) viewed them as steps taken to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. Furthermore, O’Mally and Chamot (1990) looked at these strategies as special thoughts or behaviors individuals use to comprehend, learn, or retain new information.

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Researchers also seem to recommend several key factors contributing to variability in strategy use (e.g., Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Rubin, 1975; Rubin & Thompson, 1994; Stern, 1975; Wenden, 1987b). These factors include learners’ age, gender, perceived proficiency, aptitude, attitude, motivation, anxiety, individual learning style, personality, and language background. In line with this, the researchers’ concern in this study lies in addressing EFL learning strategies in terms of both: (a) use frequency and (b) factors influencing use frequency.

Recent research has focused on determining whether there are connections between strategy use and language proficiency (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2003; Wharton, 2000). These studies reveal that, compared with less proficient language learners, proficient learners employ more strategies. For instance, Green and Oxford (1995) investigated the use of learning strategies by Puerto Rican university students reporting that successful language learners engage in more frequent and higher level of strategy use than less successful learners. Similarly, Park (1997) examined the relationship between language learning strategy use of Korean students and their English proficiency as measured by Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The findings suggest a positive linear relationship between strategy use and proficiency level: the higher the TOEFL scores were, the more strategies were used. In the same vein, Wharton’s (2000) examination of the relationship between the strategy use of college bilingual students in Singapore and their measured language proficiency revealed that higher strategy use was associated with a higher proficiency level. Bremner’s (1999) investigation of Hong Kong learners’ strategy use revealed they favored compensatory and metacognitive strategies over affective and memory strategies. In short, these studies clearly demonstrate a positive relationship between language proficiency and strategy use.

Whereas those researchers highlighted measured proficiency level, others (e.g., Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Wharton, 2000) leaned on perceived proficiency level as reported by the learners themselves. The findings of the latter researchers seem to suggest a significant positive relationship between students’ perceived proficiency level and strategy use; the higher the self-rating proficiency was, the more frequently the strategy use was.

Researchers have also addressed the relationship of age, gender, culture, aptitude and motivation, with learning styles on learning strategy use. For example, research reports females as relatively more frequent users of strategies (Ehrman, & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1993). Politzer (1983) and Ehrman and Oxford (1989), for instance, report that females demonstrated higher frequency use of social learning strategies. Oxford & Nyikos (1989) also reported females’ higher use frequency of formal rule-based (e.g., generating and revising rules, analyzing words) and conversational input (e.g., asking for pronunciation correction) strategies. However, Wharton’s (2000) findings on bilingual Singaporeans reporting that males used strategies more frequently than females suggest otherwise. According to Wharton, previous language learning experience (e.g., bilingual education) might be more influential than gender on the use of certain strategy types.

Other researchers (e.g., Bedell & Oxford, 1996; Grainger, 1997; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Politzer, 1983; Reid, 1987; Wharton, 2000) focused on the relationship between strategy use and cultural background. Their findings indicate that learners from different cultural backgrounds varied in their strategy preferences. For example,
Politzer’s (1983) finding that Asians prefer memorization strategies while Hispanics prefer social strategies is a case in point.

Although the extant literature addressing EFL strategy use is rich, there are few studies that target EFL-major undergraduates. This study comes to fill this void through investigating EFL learning strategy use at the university level. This research explores EFL learners’ preference of various strategies and the extent to which the use frequency is influenced by gender and perceived foreign language proficiency. So saying, the following two questions guide this study:

1. What language learning strategies do English-major Jordanian EFL undergraduates use more/less frequently?
2. Is there any statistically significant variability ($\alpha = .05$) in strategy use attributed to each: gender or perceived linguistic proficiency level?

**Method**

**PARTICIPANTS**

The sample consisted of a total of 111 English-major students (17 freshmen, 27 sophomores, 31 juniors, and 36 seniors), with 47 males and 64 females who voluntarily participated in the study. According to their own perceived linguistic proficiency level, the participants were classified into three linguistic proficiency levels: beginner (13); intermediate (82); and advanced (16). The participants, all native speakers of Arabic ranging between 18 and 24 years old, were enrolled in a public Jordanian university where the researchers work.

**INSTRUMENT**

Oxford’s (1990) two-part survey was used in this study. The first, Individual Background Questionnaire (IBQ), aimed at collecting demographic data about the participants while the second — the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) — collected data about language learning strategy use. The reported reliability of the factors of the SILL ranged between 0.85 and 0.98 (Oxford, 1996). This inventory categorises the learning strategies under two major types (direct and indirect), with primary strategy categories under each type. These primary categories are also represented by subsequent secondary strategies (Oxford, 1996).

The SILL has two versions (native English speakers learning a foreign language (version 5.1, 80 items) and speakers of other language learning English (version 7.0, 50 items). In this study the second version of the questionnaire was used. The items of the SILL is followed by a five-point Likert scale ($1 = \text{Almost never true}, 2 = \text{Generally not true}, 3 = \text{Somewhat true}, 4 = \text{Generally true}, \text{and 5 = Always almost true}$). To ensure the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach alpha was calculated in this study yielding .81.

To ensure participants’ full understanding of the instrument, the researchers administered an equivalent Arabic version of SILL. Towards this end, the researchers used the back-translation method, a process that has been recommended to increase the validity of the test when given in another language (Brislen, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973).

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The researchers administered the survey first-hand. Participants were presented with the IBQ followed by the SILL in the same session. Participants were asked to read each item carefully, reflect on their actual language learning strategy use, and respond
accordingly. The questionnaires were distributed, responded to, and collected during class time. Upon collecting these questionnaires, data were fed into and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Package).

**Results**

The mean value for student use of the entire learning strategies was 3.35, with a standard deviation of .48. This, according to Oxford’s categorization (i.e., high usage 3.5–5) means that the students can be described as ‘low’ high learning strategy users. The most frequently used strategy category was the metacognitive ($M = 3.86$), followed by the cognitive ($M = 3.44$), the social ($M = 3.37$), the affective ($M = 3.19$), and the compensation ($M = 3.17$). The category of the least used strategies was that of memory ($M = 3.11$).

**INDIVIDUAL STRATEGY USE**

At the level of individual strategies, the participants were high users of 19 strategy items (38%) and medium users of 29 (58%). However, they reported rare use frequency of two strategies; namely, writing down their feelings in a language learning diary (affective) and using flashcards to remember new English words (memory).

The individual strategies that contributed to the high use of the metacognitive category were associated with consistently looking for ways that would improve English learning ($M = 4.41$), monitoring English learning progress ($M = 4.27$), paying attention to their English-speaking interlocutors ($M = 4.23$), and identifying their mistakes to enhance their performance ($M = 4.06$).

**STRATEGY USE BY GENDER**

To explore the relationship of gender differences with strategy use, $t$ test was run twice: first with the six strategy categories and then with individual strategies. The results showed that the mean difference was significant for affective strategies ($t = –2.02, p = .04$). Females ($M = 3.24, SD = .69$) reported higher use frequency compared with males ($M = 2.95, SD = .69$). And although the difference was not statistically significant pertinent to the other five strategy categories, it should be noted that the mean response of the females was consistently higher. This suggests that females are higher strategy users, regardless of category under question.

To explore the relationship of gender with individual strategy use, independent $t$ test was used. Only four individual strategies yielded significant differences: three cognitive and one affective. In two of the three related to cognition, females reported higher strategy use frequency than males. Females opted to find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into intelligible parts ($t = –3.492, P = .001$) and make summaries of heard or read information ($t = –2.596, P = .01$). Males registered higher frequency of watching English television shows and going to English movies ($t = 2.03, P = .04$). Pertinent to affection, the only strategy yielding significant differences ($t = –2.60, P = .01$) was encouraging oneself to speak English even when feeling afraid of making a mistake. On this strategy, females reported higher frequency use ($M = 3.80$) than males ($M = 3.19$).

**STRATEGY USE BY PROFICIENCY LEVEL**

Since the participants were classified according to their perceived proficiency level into three categories (low, intermediate, advanced), ANOVA was used to explore the
impact of this variable on strategy use. ANOVA was used twice: first with the six strategy types and second with individual strategies. When there were significant differences, Scheffe was used for multiple comparisons.

The results showed statistically significant differences in students’ deployment of all strategy categories except compensation. And even though compensation did not yield significant differences ($\alpha = .05$), advanced proficiency students ($M = 3.31$) used this category relatively more frequently than the other two groups that shared almost the same mean ($M = 3.15$).

The results showed significant differences in social ($F_{7.041}, p = .001$), memory ($F_{3.173}, p = .046$), cognitive ($F_{7.422}, p = .001$), affective ($F_{5.416}, p = .006$), and metacognitive strategies ($F_{6.484}, p = .002$). The source of difference revealed that perceived advanced proficiency was consistently associated with higher use frequency. The mean of advanced proficiency perceivers was significantly higher than that of intermediate and low groups — with reference to social learning strategies ($M = 3.90, 3.00, 3.33$, respectively), cognitive strategies ($M = 3.93, 3.14, 3.39$), and metacognitive strategies ($M = 4.33, 3.54, 3.81$).

Advanced students also reported higher frequency use, though not statistically significant, than the intermediate group on memory ($M = 3.44, 3.05$, respectively) and affective strategies ($M = 3.64, 2.98$, respectively). The advanced students registered significant or relatively higher use on all strategy categories other than on social, cognitive, and metacognitive.

When ANOVA was run to test the relationship of perceived proficiency with individual-strategy use, the results indicated significant differences relevant to 15 strategies. Almost consistently, the significant difference was between advanced and low perceived proficiency levels. Nearly half of these strategies fell under psychological or cognitive factors i.e., they were strongly related to the way students approached language learning, rather than what they actually did (i.e., use, read, write, and so on). For example, the perceived advanced, compared with the low proficiency participants reported significantly higher strategy use frequency in regard to the following: I encourage myself to speak English even when I feel afraid of making a mistake ($F_{5.80}, P = .004, M = 4.38, 2.92$, respectively); I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English ($F_{4.13}, P = .019, M = 3.94, 2.69$, respectively); I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them ($F_{3.86}, P = .024, M = 4.00, 3.00$, respectively); I read magazines, books, newspapers, and textbooks written in English ($F_{6.913}, P = .001, M = 4.25, 2.69$, respectively); I ask questions in English to other students or native speakers of English ($F_{7.246}, P = .001, M = 4.19 2.50$, respectively); I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English $F(6.89, P = .002, M = 4.38, 2.92$, respectively); I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English, $F(5.33, P = .006, M = 4.38, 3.15$, respectively); I use the English words I know in different ways ($F_{3.48}, P = .034, M = 4.00, 3.00$, respectively).

Additionally, the advanced students reported higher use frequency than the intermediate regarding the following items: I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English ($F_{3.88}, P = .02, M = 4.38, 3.52$, respectively); I pay attention when someone is speaking English ($F_{3.97}, P = .022, M = 4.81, 4.15$, respectively); I start conversations in English ($F_{7.30}, P = .001, M = 3.94, 2.77$, respectively).

The reported use frequency of both of the perceived advanced and intermediate groups was significantly higher than low on the following two strategies: (a) I try to find patterns (grammar) in English ($M = 3.81, 3.32$, and 2.23, respectively), and (b) I
practice English with other students or native speakers of English ($M = 4.25, 3.02,$ and $2.15$, respectively).

Intermediates reported the highest significant use frequency ($M = 3.40$) on only one strategy; namely, finding the meaning of an English word by dividing it into intelligible parts ($F = 3.62, P = .030$) compared with low ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.26$). On the other hand, perceived low proficiency participants reported significantly higher strategy-use frequency ($M = 4.38$) than intermediates ($M = 3.11$) pertinent to only one strategy, noticing if one is tense or nervous when studying or using English.

**Discussion**

Based on what the participants reported, they can generally be categorised as ‘low’ high strategy users; their overall strategy use frequency is above the average. The metacognitive category was their top preference, which indicates that their learning practices reflect their conscious awareness of the necessity to enhance their learning. They have clear goals, monitor their progress, and consistently search for better ways to develop their English skills through attempting to communicate with speakers of English, peers, or visitors whenever possible. They are also consciously involved in self-evaluation and self-correction in light of monitoring their performance. Additionally, students make an effort in exposing themselves to the target language in the oral mode through watching television shows and movies as well as in its written mode through reading books and magazines.

In the educational system in Jordan some traditional teaching methods are still employed (e.g., teacher-fronted classrooms, little first-hand learning experiences, little exposure to EFL in authentic contexts). This makes one expect students to favour memory strategies over others. Nonetheless, a reflective look at the questionnaire items suggests that some strategies are by default less likely to attract university students. For example, strategies like using flash cards and acting the meanings of new words physically are more likely to occur with younger language learners when compared with adults. This might explain why using flashcards, for instance, ranked last ($M = 1.77$) among the 50 strategies.

To further support this argument, a memory strategy — ‘students’ thinking of the relationships between what they already know and what they currently learn’ — had a relatively high mean (3.65) and was ranked 12th among the 50 strategies. One important point from this research is that grouping the strategies under the memory category may lead to unqualified assumptions about students’ preference of different strategy categories. This is what has invited the researchers in this study to view these strategy categories not only collectively but also individually within the same category. Another possible interpretation for students’ low use frequency of memory strategies is the recent trend in the Jordanian educational system toward integrating technology into instruction and departing away from traditional teaching methods. Hence, students may depart from favouring strategies associated with rote-learning and mere memorisation without relating what they learn to authentic communication needs and functions.

EFL learners, such as our participants can be expected to use compensatory strategies fairly frequently, however it ranked second last. For example, students reported low frequency in making up new words, which can be attributed to their poor vocabulary reservoir, little chance for language practice, and little need for
language use in real-life communication. On the other hand, the participants reported utilising gestures, guessing meanings of words, and using the dictionary fairly frequently. Gestures are nested within the learner’s cultural context; hence their use in self-expression requires linguistic input neither in reception nor in production. Since students do not have the reservoir that enables them to determine the meanings of encountered vocabulary items, they resort to guessing. With relatively lower frequency comes dictionary use. It is the researchers’ observation that students insist on using electronic dictionaries in every single class. Had they been exposed to the language adequately in previous stages, university students would have eliminated the number of words they need to look up. Also, the urgency to refer to the dictionary might be attributed to fear of losing grades. Their global understanding of the texts they encounter and the immediate context of a vocabulary item seem insufficient to satisfy students’ thrust to understand new items.

Social strategies are needed most in a context wherein learners have the opportunity to interact with native speakers to practice the language, seek correction, and ask for help. In an EFL context where students have ‘little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language which is only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists’ (Rabab’ah, 2002:181), their enthusiasm to interact with native speakers is rarely fulfilled. Aware of this, the English department has recently allocated an Only-English day a week. Accordingly, it would be more beneficial to our students if the English departments all over the country to have exposure to native English speakers through exchange programs for both faculty and students (Rabab’ah, 2002).

The results showed that the significant gender difference were associated with affective strategies. This extends to other strategy categories, though the difference was not significant; females consistently reported higher strategy use. This fits well with the extant literature reporting females as more efficient language learners and strategy users (Ehrman, & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam, & Leavell, 2006; Lee & Oh, 2001; Oxford, 1993; Politzer, (1983).

The overwhelming majority of students in the setting of this study are females—with a ratio of almost 5:1; English is considered a soft major. So said, females have a wider space for socialization and self-expression among each other. This, in turn, may contribute to lowering the anxiety they experience in language learning. In other words, they can share their experience and emotions. It is also easier for them to establish and maintain intimate relations. It should be noted that in the Jordanian society there is a stronger association between females’ academic achievement and social status. This by default urges them to search collaboratively for solutions to emergent learning challenges. In a male-dominated society, males on the other hand, are accredited according to the prevalent social values just by the virtue of their gender; sharing their academic-related challenges does not top the list of their concerns. These together legitimise females’ preference of affective strategies.

Except in a few instances, there was an association between proficiency level and strategy use. When there were significant differences these differences were always in favour of advanced perceived proficiency. Not only this, but also when intermediate level students differed significantly in their reported strategy use frequency, the difference was with beginners’ use frequency. Even though there was no significant difference relevant to compensation strategies, advanced level students reported relatively higher use compared to any of the other two groups, followed by
intermediate, and then beginner students. Given that the findings of many researchers (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2003; Wharton, 2000) demonstrate a positive linear relationship between the two variables under question, one would expect advanced students to significantly surpass the other groups in using compensation strategies.

What could stand behind the comparability of different student-group responses is possibly that relative to other strategy types that can be used when dealing with the written mode of the language, compensation strategies are the ones that are most badly needed in verbal communication, which our students lack. In other words, regardless of their reported proficiency level, what our three student groups share is the low amount of exposure to English. Still, this does not demise advanced students’ use of such strategies compared to other groups as witnessed by their relative higher use.

The strategies viewed individually across the three perceived proficiency groups, 15 yielded significant differences. The majority of these (11 with a ratio of 73%) were favored by advanced students. Carefully considered, these strategies shape an answer to the question, “What are the most effective and widely used strategies from the viewpoint of distinguished students in an EFL context?” That is, successful, or excellent English learners if you want, are those who not only encourage themselves to speak English regardless of the mistakes they may make or plan their schedule to allocate enough time to study English, but are also constantly in urge to improving their language through using English with any conceivable source of English input. They also look for opportunities to widen the scope of their literacy environment in order to practice English via reading magazines, books, newspapers, and textbooks as much as possible. Their literacy practices extend to writing notes, messages, letters or reports to enrich their vocabulary reservoir. Considering the how, successful learners not only reflect on their learning but also come up with conscious conclusions that help them self-regulate their learning process; hence, lowering their anxiety level. Briefly, when considering strategy use frequency, it does matter what proficiency level students have.

In conclusion, this study investigated the impact of the latter variables on EFL undergraduates’ overall learning strategy use. The findings support the line of research suggesting that females use learning strategies more frequently than males. Especially since it is not clear whether male students avoid some strategies intentionally or not, one implication based on this finding opens the door wide for considering the possibility of enhancing males’ awareness of the importance of such strategies. Therefore, the English departments should adopt a strategic learning-development policy in which students’ actual needs direct the curriculum. Strategic learning in this sense is a thought pattern that is not bound by the type of content with which the students interact or the physical location in which they find themselves. In implementing such curriculum, EFL instructors are responsible for helping learners become consciously aware of the many strategies available for use. If developing learners’ autonomous life-long learning is the goal, EFL instructors can show learners the many options they have.

Students can be assisted to: (a) accept the importance of being strategic learners, (b) reflect on and bringing to consciousness the learning strategies they use, and (c) acquire the strategies capable of enhancing their learning. To exploit strategies efficiently, students need to practice using these strategies until they get to a point where they can use them automatically.
Additionally, instructors and students should be reminded of the impediment posed by the EFL context in which they interact. The dilemma Jordanian EFL students seem to struggle with is the limited potential of their EFL context to prompt them to use the language. Since the extant literature confirms that EFL learners use strategies less frequently than ESL learners, EFL instructors have to compensate for this impediment by extending the target language learning experience beyond the classroom. This necessitates providing students with opportunities to use the target language as much as possible.

Out-of-class language assignments are most likely to compensate for the absence of authentic communication in the EFL setting. To establish a second-language-like learning setting in a foreign language context requires extending learning beyond the classroom. Practically, English language clubs, English discussion forums, magazines, journals, bulletin boards, and T.V. programs can be an asset. In institutions where students have access to the blackboard, instructors can initiate discussion forums for students to practice the target language.

The findings indicate that strategy use frequency characterises more, as opposed to less, high perceived-proficiency level. This given, the researchers recommend that instructors scaffold learners, especially beginners, and take them from their comfort zone to a more challenging one through direct instruction and modelling. This, at a following step, necessitates a gradual release of responsibility to students manifest in more hands-on tasks that extend to students more opportunities for language practice.

References


