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Research Article

The Relationship between Language Learning Strategy Use, Language Proficiency and Learner Gender: Case study of the first-year EFL students at the University of Mascara-ALGERIA

Soumia Tabeti[1] and Dr. Mohammed Grazib[2]

[1]Phd Student, Department Of English Language, University Of Djillali Liabès, Sidi Bel Abbès - ALGERIA

[2]Lecturer Department of English Language, University of Molay Taher, Saida - ALGERIA

*Corresponding Author
Soumia Tabeti

Abstract: Language learning strategies are a key factor in language learning. As such, several studies have emphasized the importance of the use of these strategies and the factors that affect learners of language learning strategy choice. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the learner's language learning strategies use, learners' gender and their English proficiency level. The empirical study was carried out at the level of the Department of English (University of Mascara) on a random sample of 176 first-year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Version 7.0), developed by Oxford (1990), was used to assess the students strategy use. In addition to that, a background questionnaire was used to collect information about the language proficiency level and learner's gender. The results revealed that students use learning strategies with acceptable frequency. Meta-cognitive strategies were the most frequent, while memory strategies were the least frequent. Proficient learners showed significantly more strategy use, as well as more use of cognitive, meta-cognitive and social strategies. According to the results, females used memory, cognitive, meta-cognitive and affective learning strategies more frequently than males.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, EFL, proficiency, gender, first-year students, University of Mascara-ALGERIA.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers and educators of foreign languages (FL) usually complain about non-satisfactory language performance of FL learners. This topic complaints prompted researchers in the field of learning and teaching foreign languages in an attempt to find the reasons behind this problem and propose solutions. Until the late of the 1960s, researchers focused on evaluating the methods and materials of teaching. However, since the beginning of 1970s, the focus was on investigating the social, psychological and affective variables that promote or hinder the success and achievement. Among these variables are: motivation, attitudes, personality, learning styles, and learning strategies. Research, in general, has presented evidence that these variables correlate with success in the foreign language learning (Oxford and Cohen, 1992).

The early research about the differences in learning among FL learners have motivated researchers to explore the basis of these differences with the goal of providing instruction in order to facilitate learning. In order to identify these differences, researchers have tried to determine the characteristics of "good language learner". Oxford (1994) stated that: "*Early researchers tended to make lists of strategies and other features presumed to be essential for all "good L2 learners*". Rubin (1975) suggested that good language learners are willing and accurate guessers; have a strong drive to communicate; are often uninhibited; are willing to make mistakes; focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing; take advantage of all practice opportunities; monitor their speech as well as that of others; and pay attention to meaning. On the basis of the above studies results, the assumption was that if less successful learners are taught how to use these types of strategies, they become more effective and independent learners (Ahmed Ismail & Al Khatib, 2013).

The purpose of the present study is to assess language learning strategies (LLS) use among the first-year EFL students at the University of Mascara and to

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explore the effect of proficiency level and gender on reported strategy use. More specifically, the purpose of the present study is : (a) to assess the first-year EFL learners' use of LLSs on two SILL levels: overall use and use of each of the six categories of strategies; and (b) to explore the effect of language proficiency (measured by language self-efficacy beliefs) and gender on reported strategy use. Thus, three questions of the study may be addressed as the following:

- ➢ What are the language learning strategies that are used by the first-year EFL students at the University of Mascara?
- ➢ Is there a significant difference in language learning strategy use due to gender?
- ➢ Is there a significant difference in language learning strategy use due to language proficiency as reflected by language self-efficacy beliefs (i.e., how good learners perceived themselves to be in English).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Definitions of Language Learning Strategy
Rigney (1978), and Rubin (1987), define language learning strategies as behaviors, steps, or techniques that language learners apply to facilitate language learning. O'Malley *et al.,* (1985) based their definition on Rigney's (1978) definition of learning strategies as procedures which facilitate acquisition, retention, retrieval and performance. O'Malley & Chamot (1990) define learning strategies as "*the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information*" (p. 1). Rubin (1987) stated that learning strategies "*are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly*" (p. 22).

Oxford, the author of many publications and articles concerning this issue, expands the definition of language learning strategies as *"[...] specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations*" (1990, p. 8). Cohen (2007) agrees with Oxford's point of view and adds that the purpose of language learner strategies is to enhance learning, to perform specific tasks, to solve specific problems, to make learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable and to compensate for a deficit in learning, then, he argues for the addition of a further dimension to the definition of language learning strategies: that of consciousness. He believes that the element of conscious choice is important to the language learning strategy concept because "*the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from those processes that are not strategic*". Cohen argues that learners who select learning strategies must be at least partially aware of them even if they are not attending to them fully (Cohen, 1998).

2.2. Classifications of Language Learning Strategy
In an attempt to produce a classification scheme with mutually exclusive categories, Rubin (1981) divided language learning strategies into two main groups of strategies (direct and indirect), then, he distinguishes further between eight subgroups of strategies:

Direct Strategies
- ➢ Clarification/verification,
- ➢ Monitoring,
- ➢ Memorization,
- ➢ guessing/inductive inferencing,
- ➢ deductive reasoning ,
- ➢ practice,

Indirect Strategies
- ➢ Creating opportunities for practice,
- ➢ production tricks

While O'Malley and his colleagues developed taxonomy of their own, identifying 26 strategies which they divided into three categories: metacognitive (knowing about learning), cognitive (specific to distinct learning activities) and social. The metacognitive and cognitive categories correspond approximately to Rubin's indirect and direct strategies. However, the addition of the social mediation category was an important step in the direction of acknowledging the importance of interactional strategies in language learning.

From an extensive review of the literature, Oxford gathered a large number of language learning strategies and, on the basis of factor analyses, divided them into six groups:

Direct Strategies
- ➢ Memory strategies (which relate to how students remember language)
- ➢ Cognitive strategies (which relate to how students acquire knowledge about language)
- ➢ Compensation strategies (which enable students to make up for limited knowledge)

Indirect Strategies
- ➢ Meta-cognitive strategies (relating to how students manage the learning process)
- ➢ Affective strategies (relating to students' feelings)
- ➢ Social strategies (which involve learning by interaction with others).

These six categories underlie the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) used by Oxford and others for a great deal of research in the learning strategy field.

2.3. Features of language learning strategies
Even though the definitions used for language learning strategies are not uniform among the scholars in the field, there are a number of basic characteristics

accepted by them. Oxford (1990) summarizes her view of LLS by listing twelve key features below as they:

- Contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
- Allow learners to become more self-directed.
- Expand the role of teachers.
- Are problem oriented.
- Are specific actions taken by the learner.
- Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
- Support learning both directly and indirectly.
- Are not always observable.
- Are often conscious.
- Can be taught.
- Are flexible.
- Are influenced by a variety of factors.

(Oxford, 1990, p. 9)

2.4. Factors Influencing the Choice of Language Learning Strategy

Oxford (1990) synthesized existing research on how the following factors influence the choice of strategies used among students learning a second language.

Motivation

More motivated students tended to use more strategies than less motivated students, and the particular reason for studying the language (motivational orientation, especially as related to career field) was important in the choice of strategies.

Gender

Females reported greater overall strategy use than males in many studies (although sometimes males surpassed females in the use of a particular strategy).

Cultural Background

Rote memorization and other forms of memorization were more prevalent among some Asian students than among students from other cultural backgrounds. Certain other cultures also appeared to encourage this strategy among learners.

Attitudes and Beliefs

These were reported to have a profound effect on the strategies learners choose, with negative attitudes and beliefs often causing poor strategy use or lack of orchestration of strategies.

Type of Task

The nature of the task helped determine the strategies naturally employed to carry out the task.

Age and L2 Stage

Students of different ages and stages of L2 learning used different strategies, with certain strategies often being employed by older or more advanced students.

Learning Style

Learning style (general approach to language learning) often determined the choice of L2 learning strategies. For example, analytic-style students preferred strategies such as contrastive analysis, rule-learning, and dissecting words and phrases, while global students used strategies to find meaning (guessing, scanning, predicting) and to converse without knowing all the words (paraphrasing, gesturing).

Tolerance of Ambiguity

Students who were more tolerant of ambiguity used significantly different learning strategies in some instances than did students who were less tolerant of ambiguity (Oxford, 1994).

2.5. Previous studies on Language Learning Strategy

Several studies used the SILL to measure strategy use and explored the effect of variables (e.g., gender, proficiency, motivation) on strategy use. Since the present study focuses on the effect of proficiency and gender, this review of the literature will be limited to studies that investigated these two variables. A number of studies have investigated the relationship between language proficiency level and strategy use. Overall, these studies reported a positive relationship. More specifically, more proficient learners reported higher frequency of strategy use than did less proficient peers (Lan & Oxford, 2003; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). For example, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) found that language self-ratings of language proficiency had a significant effect on strategy use. Moreover, in his study of LLS use by Irish learners of German as an L2, Bruen (2001) found that greater strategy use was associated with higher levels of oral proficiency in German. Similarly, Lan and Oxford (2003) found significant effect for proficiency level on Taiwanese elementary school EFL learners' use of cognitive, compensatory, meta-cognitive, and affective strategies.

Besides language proficiency, gender has also received great attention as a variable that may account for variation in strategy use. Ehrman and Oxford (1989) and Oxford and Nyikos (1989) discovered distinct gender differences in strategy use. The study by Green and Oxford (1995) came to the same conclusion. Ehrman and Oxford's (1990) study, however failed to discover any evidence of differing language learning strategy use between the sexes. Watanabe (1990) found that female EFL students at a Japanese university used more communication strategies than did male students. Lan and Oxford (2003) also found that girls surpassed boys in applying cognitive, compensatory, meta-cognitive, and affective strategies.

Touba (1992) used an Arabic version of the SILL with 500 university students. The students reported high frequency of use of meta-cognitive and memory strategies and low use of cognitive strategies. On the other hand, Kaylani (1996) used an Arabic version of the SILL to assess strategy use by a sample of 255 high school seniors (12th graders) in Jordan. She also studied the effect of gender on strategy use. She

found that "female students used significantly more memory, cognitive, compensatory and affective strategies than male students." (p. 84). Studies which have examined the relationship between sex and strategy use have come to mixed conclusions. It might be concluded, perhaps, that, although men and women do not always demonstrate differences in language learning strategy use, some studies found that women tend to use more language learning strategies than men.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STADY
3.1. Participants
This study was conducted with 176 first year EFL students (76.7% female and 23.3% male). Almost 90.9% of the total numbers of participants were between 17 and 20 years old. 27.3% surveyed students believe that they have a good level in English, 61.9% have a medium level and 10.8% they have a low level. 61.9% of learners stated that they enjoy when they learn English, 4.5% don't enjoy and 12.5% are neutral. All the subjects had studied English formally for 8 years. As a measure to language self efficacy or students' perception of themselves as learners, the students were asked to rate themselves on a scale from one to three to indicate how successful they think they are at English language (listening, writing, speaking, reading) 1= very good, 2= medium, 3= poor. Table N°1 shows the distribution of participants by level and gender.

Table No1: Distribution of Subjects by Proficiency Level and Gender

Proficiency Level	Women	Men
Very good	36	12
Medium	84	25
Low	15	4
Total (n=176)	135	41

3.2. Instrument
In order to measure the students strategy use, Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Version 7.0) was used (Oxford, 1990). It consists of 50 items that represent the six categories of strategies mentioned above. The items were given scores on the basis of a five point Likert scale and divided into six parts, which showed different categories of strategies. In addition to that, a background questionnaire was used to collect information about the language proficiency level and learner's gender. The selection of this taxonomy has been made on two grounds. First, it has been used to assess strategy use in more than 15 studies involving EFL/ESL learners from many countries and cultural backgrounds, such as Hispanic, Egyptian, Jordanian, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean (Oxford, 1996). Second, its reliability and validity have been widely documented (Oxford, 1992).

An Arabic translation of Oxford's (1990) SILL Version 7.0 for ESL/EFL students was used to measure strategy use. This 50-item taxonomy covers six broad categories, each represented by a number of individual strategies (items): Memory strategies (items 1–9), Cognitive strategies (items 10–23), Compensatory strategies (items 24–29), Meta-cognitive strategies (items 30 38), Affective strategies (items 39–44) and Social strategies (items 45–50). For the statistical analysis of the data the raw scores were entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Programs (SPSS), version 22. The table N°2 below shows some items from the SILL.

Table No2: Examples of Items Used in the Study

Categories of strategies	Examples of items
Memory strategies	- *I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.*
Cognitive strategies	- *I watch English language TV shows or go to movies spoken in English*
Compensation strategies	- *If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same*
Meta-cognitive strategies	- *I pay attention when someone is speaking English.*
Affective strategies	- *I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making mistakes.*
Social strategies	- *I practice English with other students*

3.3. Data Collection
Participants completed the SILL in class in 20 minutes under the supervision of the regular class instructors under conditions of anonymity and confidentiality. The participants also provided information about their age, gender and proficiency level. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was used to determine variation in the means of reported strategy use (dependent variable) across the entire SILL as well as that of each of the six categories of strategies by language proficiency level and gender (independent variables). To test the SILL's reliability of the Arabic translation version, the researchers also used Cronbach-alpha which was found to be .902. The following table shows the level of reliability of each type of strategy. All scores are higher than 60% which shows the internal consistency of the items.

Table No 3: Reliability Test

Reliability Measure	Number of items	Cronbach-alpha
Memory strategies	From 1 to 9 (9)	.603
Cognitive strategies	From 10 to 23 (14)	.742
Compensation strategies	From 24 to 29 (6)	.627
Meta-cognitive strategies	From 30 to 38 (9)	.827
Affective strategies	From 39 to 44 (6)	.6
Social strategies	From 45 to 50 (6)	.722
Overall	50	.902

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Overall Use of Language Learning Strategies

The overall use of language learning strategies by the subjects has been shown in Table N°4. This table presents the mean and standard deviation of strategy use among all the subjects. For this purpose, Oxford (1990) developed a scale, which reflects the level of strategy use: (1) High (3.5-5.0), (2) Medium (2.5-3.4), and (3) Low (1.0-2.4).The average of strategy use ranged from a high 3.72 to a low of 2.79, while the overall mean for the sample was 3.22. As for strategy categories, meta-cognitive strategies were the most frequently used strategies (M=3.72) and memory strategies were the least frequently used (M=2.79), while between the two in descending order were social strategies (M=3.39), compensation strategies (M= 3.36), affective strategies (M=3.12), and cognitive strategies (M=2.99).

Table No 4: Description of Overall Use of Language Learning Strategies

Strategies	Mean (M)	standard deviations (S-D)	Level of strategy usage
Memory strategies	2.79	.618	Medium
Cognitive strategies	2.99	.562	Medium
Compensation strategies	3.36	.675	Medium
Meta-cognitive strategies	3.72	.696	**High**
Affective strategies	3.12	.783	Medium
Social strategies	3.39	.841	Medium
Overall strategies	3.22	.695	Medium

4.2. Strategy use and proficiency level

To examine the use of language learning strategies in each category of students with different levels of achievement, we have compared each category with the different levels. From the table below we note that students with a high level use strategies more than those with medium level and those with a medium level use strategies more than those with a low level. Consequently, this means that whenever the students use LLSs frequently their level of achievement is higher. Comparing the use of each language learning strategy category, students with high and medium levels of achievement tended to use Meta-cognitive, Social and Compensation strategies more frequently than other strategies. Students with deferent levels of achievement use Meta-cognitive strategies the most and use Memory strategies the least.

Table No5: Means and SDs of the Six Strategies in Relation to Proficiency Level

Proficiency level		Memory Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Compensation Strategies	Meta-cognitive strategies	Affective Strategies	Social Strate-gies
High	M	2.86	**3.27**	**3.44**	**3.97**	**3.09**	**3.70**
	S-D	.646	.497	.575	.702	.806	.736
Medium	M	2.78	2.92	**3.33**	**3.66**	**3.13**	**3.37**
	S-D	.605	.559	.723	.684	.782	.795
Low	M	2.65	2.69	**3.31**	**3.43**	**3.18**	2.68
	S-D	6.28	.474	.632	.578	.768	9.34
Total	M	2.79	2.99	3.36	3.72	3.12	3.39
	S-D	6.18	.562	.675	.696	.783	.841

Results presented and discussed above encourage us to conduct the ANOVA analysis to see if the LLS use explains the first year EFL student's achievement. It is clear from the table below that student's achievement is explained by three categories of strategies, namely: Cognitive strategies, Social strategies and Meta-cognitive strategies. What drives us to say that more students in first year EFL use the Meta-cognitive, Cognitive and Social strategies more their achievement is higher. We can conclude that the variation in the achievement level of the first year EFL students at the University of Mascara is explained by these three strategies, so these strategies predicted positively students' achievement.

Table N. o6. One way ANOVA Students' Achievement by the Components of LLS

	ANOVA RESULTS		
	Ddl	F	Sig.
Memorystrategy	175	,828	,439
Cognitivestrategy	175	10,369	**,000**
Componsationstrategy	175	,548	,579
Metacognitivestrategy	175	5,293	**,006**
Affectivestrategy	175	,112	,894
Socialstrategy	175	11,282	**,000**

The findings are consistent with the findings of many studies in that students with high English proficiency level employed a greater diversity and more frequency of English learning strategies than did students with low English proficiency level (Kumasaraphan, 2015; Hashemi & Hadavi, 2015).

4.3. Strategy Use and Gender

Results related to the third research questions (What is the relationship between male and female students' use of English language learning strategies?) reveal an overall medium range of strategy use (males: $M = 3.15$, $SD = .648$ and females: $M = 3.25$, $SD = .714$).

The differences between the mean scores of male and female students in regard to the overall strategy use were very small. Findings also indicate that both male and female learners use meta-cognitive strategies (1st Rank) and social strategies (2nd Rank) the most and memory strategies the least as mentioned in the table N°6. In the same table we found that there is no significant differences between male and female learners in the use of the overall strategies except a significant difference in the use of the affective strategies (Sig=0.008). While there were no significant differences between male and female students in the use of the other five strategies developed by Oxford.

Table No 7: Means and SDs of the Six Strategies in Relation to Gender

Strategies	Male (n=41)			Female (n=135)			Sig (2-tailed) confidence interval 95%
	M	S-D	Rank	M	S-D	Rank	
Memory strategies	2.72	.583	6	2.81	.629	6	.402
Cognitive strategies	2.96	.570	4	3.00	.661	5	.691
Compensation strategies	3.4	.672	3	3.35	.678	3	.662
Meta-cognitive strategies	3.60	.657	1	3.76	.705	1	.209
Affective strategies	2.83	.616	5	3.21	.753	4	**.008**
Social strategies	3.41	.790	2	3.38	.858	2	.805
Overall strategies	3.15	.648		3.25	.714		

5. CONCLUSION

The findings reported above show that the overall use of LLS by the students was found medium and that student's proficiency level and gender have statistically a significant effect on frequency of overall strategy use. Additionally, gender has a main effect on the use of the affective strategies in favor of females. Moreover, with regard to their effect on the use of each of the six categories of strategies, proficiency level has a main effect on five categories, namely memory, cognitive, meta-cognitive, compensatory, and social, in favor of university students.

The findings reported also that students with a high level use strategies more than those with medium level and those with a medium level use strategies more than those with a low level. Consequently, this means that whenever the students use English language learning strategies frequently their level of achievement is higher. The results of this research will help students to raise awareness in the use of LLSs. Thus, an important usage of LLSs will help students to improve their level. In the other hand, teachers should take into account students' differences in their teaching.

6. Implications and Recommendations

The findings of the present study have implications for research on strategies and classroom instruction. First, the findings have shown variation in strategy use by the learners, language proficiency level and gender. The explanation of these patterns can be facilitated by further exploration of the effect of other individual variables on strategy use. Among these variables are attitudes, motivation, personality type, and learning style. Second, the findings of the study have practical implications for classroom instruction. Since the frequency of strategy use reported by the first-year EFL students falls within the medium range, a need arises for providing students with further opportunities to practice a wide variety of strategies that are appropriate to the different instructional tasks and activities that constitute an essential part of the classroom language learning experience. Third, the findings have implications for the design and development of instructional materials.

The results about variation in strategy use by proficiency level can guide materials developers in their selection and incorporation of activities and tasks that

target certain strategies. They can also benefit from strategy-based materials. For example, Chamot and O'Malley (1996) have developed materials based on the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), which advocated content-based instruction, academic- language development, and explicit instruction in learning strategies (1996, p. 167). Finally, to implement explicit strategies-based instruction, teachers need to receive training in strategy assessment and instruction. Training in strategy assessment involves showing teachers how to use multiple data collection methods (e.g., interviews, self-reports, think-aloud, diaries, journal dialog) to identify, describe, and classify the strategies currently used by their students. The involvement of students in strategy assessment activities heightens their strategic awareness, and fosters their understanding of the value of the effective use of strategies for autonomous learning, which helps them gain greater control over their own learning.

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