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Original scientific paper

THE ROLE OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN EFL SUCCESS IN STUDENTS OF ENGLISH, PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TETOVA

Behare KASAMI
University of Tetova
e-mail: behare.kasami@unite.edu.mk

Abstract

Second language learning strategies encompass a range of techniques and approaches which learners of a foreign language employ to enhance their learning experience. This paper explores the range of second language learning strategies used by students and its role on their academic success. The students enrolled in the English department, the students taking the English course at Faculty of Philosophy, and Faculty of Education at the University of Tetova were included in this research. The sample of the paper comprises of 89 students—33 from the English department, 42 from Philosophy, and 14 from Education. Using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990), which measures the frequency and range of language learning strategies students use. Findings reveal that students who report higher grades also demonstrate a more frequent use of language learning strategies, suggesting that a diverse strategy range is beneficial for language acquisition.

Keywords: second language learning strategies, SILL, EFL success, patterns

1. Introduction

The research on second language acquisition (SLA) has emphasized the significance of language learning strategies (LLS) as one of the main elements of effective language learning. Research has shown that within the range of LLS, the metacognitive and cognitive strategies are the most important regarding academic achievement and proficiency. Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning process, in one hand, while in the other hand, cognitive strategies involve mental processes which are directly linked to repetition, summarizing, using imagery and the like. While the first ones lead to self-regulation and autonomy (Wenden, 1988; Oxford, 1990), the latter lead to comprehension and language input retention. Therefore, both are regarded as basis of strategic learning and key to academic achievement. The research body emphasizes the use of these strategies among successful learners, simultaneously providing evidence of positive correlation between LLS use and achievement. According to studies conducted by Lestari and Wahyudin (2020), Aziz and Shah (2020), and Bećirović et al. (2021) metacognitive strategies are the most frequently used, followed by cognitive strategies. Additionally, Habók & Magyar, 2018; Sukarni, 2019; Neman & Rolangon, 2024 have found a significant positive relationship between these strategies and academic achievement in English.

This study explores the types and frequency of language learning strategies used by university students in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) and investigates the correlation between types of strategy and students' high school grade point average (GPA) in English. Additionally, the study analyses whether the educational background, prior learning experiences influence learner strategy use. The aim of the study is to inform teaching practices and curricula designers regarding the significance of LLS in fostering learner autonomy and enhancing academic achievement and also contribute to the research body on this topic, particularly to the small number of research in the region.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition and Classification of Language Learning Strategies: Language learning strategies (LLS) are generally defined as the "steps or actions chosen by learners to enhance the learning or use of a second language, or both" (Cohen, 1995:) encompassing "actions that are clearly intended for language learning, as well as those that may well lead to learning but which do not ostensibly include learning as the primary goal" (Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1996:4). Oxford (1990) defines them as "specific actions the learner undertakes to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations". O'Malley and Chamot (1990:1) further defined LLS as "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information". Lessard-Clouston (1997), lists the characteristics of LLS where he states that LLSs can be visible behaviors, steps, and techniques, or unobservable thoughts and mental processes, and that they involve information and memory (vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, etc.). According to Chamot (2005), language learning strategies represent the procedures that facilitate learning tasks, further adding that they are most often conscious and goal-driven, particularly in the initial stages of addressing an unfamiliar language task, although they may be used with some automaticity through repeated use while remaining accessible to conscious awareness if needed. The field of language learning strategies research began in the 1970s with Rubin's (1975) and Stern's (1975) works on the successful learner. Since then, numerous classification systems for LLS have emerged, though the existence of these differing typologies indicates a lack of a single, coherent, well-accepted system for describing strategies (Oxford, 1994; Chamot, 2004). Different criteria have been used to classify strategies, leading to inconsistencies across taxonomies (Cohen, 1995; Cohen & Weaver, 2004). Early research often relied on observations of learners or categories from first language contexts, while more recent methods are data-driven, such as think-aloud protocols (Chamot, 2004).

Oxford's Classification: Considered by some to be the most comprehensive and systemic (Chamot, 2004), Oxford (1990) classifies strategies into two major categories: direct and indirect strategies. For the purposes of this paper, we have used Oxford's classification as the basis of the research, including the SILL inventory (Oxford, 1990). The author classified strategies into two major groups, direct and indirect strategies.

Direct strategies require mental processing of the language and operate directly on the language itself:

- Memory strategies – creating mental linkages, reviewing, applying image and sounds to new language
- Cognitive strategies – practicing, analyzing and reasoning
- Compensation strategies – guessing, overcoming limitations

Indirect strategies are concerned with the overall management of learning and enhance or support learning indirectly:

- Metacognitive strategies – planning, monitoring, evaluating
- Affective strategies – lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself
- Social strategies - asking questions, cooperating with others, (Oxford, 1990)

O'Malley and Chamot's Classification (1990) was based on psychological functions, and primarily classifies strategies into metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective categories.

Rubin's Classification proposes schemes that distinguish between strategies that directly affect learning and those that contribute indirectly (Oxford, 1986; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Rubin (1981) divides LLS into cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, social strategies, and communicative strategies.

Naiman et al.'s Classification (1978) includes five broad primary categories common to good language learners: active task approach, realization of language as a system, realization of

language as a means of communication and interaction, management of affective demands, and monitoring of second language performance. They also identified specific "techniques" for aspects like sound acquisition, grammar, vocabulary, and language skills (listening, talking, writing, reading) (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Other classification distinctions include grouping strategies by language skill area (listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary), by function (cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social, treated here as potentially separate from the psychological function categories), by the learner's goal (language learning vs. language use), by age or proficiency level, and according to language or culture (Cohen & Weaver, 2004).

Cohen & Weaver (2004) acknowledged that classifying strategy use in reality can be challenging, as a single action might involve multiple strategy types simultaneously (e.g., practicing introductions could be cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social), or could serve both learning and use goals, or cross multiple skill areas. However, Chamot (2004) suggests that for instructional purposes, strategy classification should be easy to understand and teach, potentially simplified into metacognitive and task-based strategies to avoid confusion in teachers and researchers.

2.2. Role of Strategies in Second Language Acquisition: Language Learning Strategies (LLS) represent a significant component in SLA, as they encompass actions and processes learners use to improve learning or use of a second language. Being that they facilitate learning tasks through various observable behaviors or mental processes, it is assumed that strategies have a multifaceted effect on SLA.

In this regard, research has shown that appropriate language learning strategies are related to successful language performance (Oxford, 1986). It also supports the effectiveness of using L2 learning strategies and has shown that their use often results in improved proficiency or achievement, either overall or in specific skill areas (Oxford, 1994; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). On the contrary, less effective students tend to use strategies less frequently, have a smaller repertoire, and often don't choose strategies appropriate for the task (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). Additionally, research shows that using appropriate strategies enables students to take responsibility for their learning, leading to learner autonomy (Oxford, 1986) and self-direction (Oxford, 1990). Moreover, strategic, self-regulated learning is considered to lie at the heart of second/foreign language acquisition (Oxford, 2013). Furthermore, Rubin (2013) claims that strategy training also aims to empower students to control the learning process. In line with this, further research has proved that LLS are teachable (Chamot, 2005; Oxford, 1986). Cohen and Weaver (2004) state that strategy-based instruction can help students become more aware of how they learn most effectively. Further, Oxford (2011) claims that explicit instruction in strategic learning can result in better learners. On the other hand, Chamot (2005) suggests that since strategy instruction has improved performance in first language tasks, it could be helpful for L2 tasks. Furthermore, research shows that LLSs can facilitate overcoming knowledge gaps, particularly compensation strategies, which function to make up for limited knowledge, where employing guessing or using gestures allows learners to maintain communication flow despite knowledge gaps (Oxford, 1990). In addition, different strategies are used for different tasks, namely while many strategies can be used for various tasks (e.g., metacognitive strategies like planning, monitoring, evaluating), others are better suited for specific task types, such as making inferences for reading/listening or substituting/paraphrasing for speaking/writing (Oxford et al., 2014).

In summary, language learning strategies play a crucial role in second language acquisition. They provide learners with conscious tools to manage and enhance their learning, improve their performance, become more autonomous, and overcome difficulties (Chamot, 2005; Oxford, 1986; 2011).

2.3. Academic Achievement and Strategy Use: Academic achievement and language learning strategies (LLS) interact in several significant ways, primarily indicating a positive relationship between effective strategy use and successful language learning outcomes.

Research strongly supports a positive relationship between LLS and success in second language (L2) learning (Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1996; Oxford, 1986; Rubin, 1975; Green & Oxford, 1995). The combination of foreign language learning and use strategies is seen as a vehicle for promoting greater success (Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1996). Strategic, self-regulated learning is considered central to second/foreign language acquisition (Oxford, 2011). Furthermore, studies suggest that the use of L2 learning strategies often leads to improved proficiency or achievement, either overall or in specific skill areas (Chamot, 2004; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Studies have found that the range and frequency of LLS use affect achievement (Chamot, 2004; Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999). In line with this, Chamot and Kupper (1989) concluded that more successful learners use strategies more frequently and vice versa, adding that less successful learners, apart from having a smaller range of strategies, often choose inappropriate strategies for the given task. Regarding the range, Bruen (2001) demonstrated a significant positive correlation between the range and frequency of LLS used and learning outcomes.

While frequency and variety are significant indicators, the research suggests that the effectiveness of strategy use and its impact on achievement also involve more nuanced factors such as appropriateness for the task; orchestration (i.e., the ability to orchestrate components of strategic behavior, including selection, analysis, deployment, monitoring, and evaluation).

Further, high achievers demonstrate greater use of metacognitive strategies (like planning, monitoring, and evaluating) to manage their own learning (Bruen, 2001; Oxford, 1989; Chamot, 2004). The importance of metacognitive strategies, particularly self-monitoring, for achieving higher proficiency is underlined (Oxford et al., 2014). Likewise, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) claim that problem identification and analyzing task objectives are metacognitive strategies that differentiate effective from less effective learners.

However, Oxford & Crookall (1989) claim that the relationship between strategy use and proficiency/achievement is complex and that while effective strategies can lead to higher proficiency, attaining higher proficiency can also make students more likely to select and use certain active strategies. Moreover, they add that high motivation can lead to significant use of strategies, and high strategy use can lead to enhanced perceived and actual proficiency, which in turn boosts self-esteem and motivation, creating a positive spiral and consequently makes the relationship between strategy use and achievement bidirectional.

In terms of variety, research claims that the task difficulty affects the strategies selected, while students may not use strategies for easy tasks or may find them insufficient for overly difficult ones (Chamot, 1998; 2004; 2005; Oxford et al.,2014). Additionally, differences exist not only in the frequency and variety but also in the way strategies are used (Chamot and Kupper, 1989). Generally, the interaction between academic achievement and LLS is dynamic. Although higher achievement is strongly associated with the use of a greater variety and frequency of LLS, this relationship is mediated by the learner's ability to select strategies that are apt for the task, utilize metacognitive skills to manage learning effectively, and often combine strategies purposefully.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants: The study involved a total of 89 undergraduate students from the University of Tetovo. Participants were selected from three academic departments: 33 students from the English Department, 42 students from the Department of Philosophy, and 14 students from the Faculty of Education. Apart from the participants of the English department, who had the majority of subjects in English, the participants of other departments had taken English as an elective course.

In terms of respondent gender, 79 were women, 10 were men.

Table 1. High schools students have graduated from

Schools	Frequence	Percent
Gymnasium	40	44.9
Medical	34	38.2
Economy	10	11.2
Other	5	5.6

Table 1 shows the classification of students by high schools they have graduated from.
Regarding the place of residence, 47 were from rural areas, while 42 were from urban areas.

3.2. Instrument: The instrument used in this study was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) foreign speakers learning English. This version of SILL consists of 50 items intended to measure the frequency of use of six categories of LLS: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.
The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Never or almost never true of me") to 5 ("Always or almost always true of me").
The questionnaire was administered in Albanian to maximize respondents' comprehension and ensure the clarity and accuracy of their responses. It has undergone the translation and back-translation procedures.

3.3. Procedure: The data for this research were collected during the last week of November 2024, considering that the period does not involve any exam sessions or other external factors that might impact student responses. An online version of the instrument was provided for the students, drafted using Google Forms. Information about the research purpose, the time required to complete the inventory, and the requirement for informed consent before completing the questionnaire was provided. It was clearly stated that participation is voluntary. While all participants were asked to report high school grades of the English course, while English department students studying in the second academic year and up were asked to provide their university GPA as well. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed throughout the research process.
Henceforth, students were provided with the link to the online questionnaire through their communication platforms, such as Google Classroom, WhatsApp, etc.

3.4. Data Analysis: Regarding data analysis, statistical methods were employed using SPSS software. A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine differences in the use of LLSs among students from different high schools. To further examine specific group differences identified by the ANOVA, a post hoc test was applied. These methods were selected to assess between-group variability and to identify differences in their reported strategy use.

4. Results

Frequency and type of strategies used by students

Table 2. Mean of LLS used by students

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
Valid	89	89	89	89	89	89
Incomplete	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	2.9750	3.5152	3.2603	3.8302	2.8371	3.4813
Standard deviation	.46110	.67827	.78172	.80840	.74873	.78915
Minimum	1.00	1.93	1.00	2.11	1.00	1.83
Maximum	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00

Table 2 shows that metacognitive strategy is mostly used by students (M=3.83). To advance knowledge of English, students tend to employ activities such setting goals for improving their EFL skills; look for people they can communicate in English, and opportunities to read as much as possible in English. Other frequently used strategies are cognitive (M=3.51) and social (M=3.48). The least used strategy is the affective (M=2.83). Students report that what they least do is trying to relax from the fear to speak in English, as well as they do not encourage themselves to speak in English fearing they might make a mistake, also they do not share with others their feelings while learning English.

Differences in strategy use between high schools

One-way ANOVA shows that there are significant differences only between high schools students have graduated from and compensation strategy use $F(4,87) = 5.487$, $p=0.001$.

Post-hoc test shows that students who have graduated from the Economic high school (M = 4.89, SD = 0.89) use the compensation strategy while learning English than Gymnasium (M = 3.22, SD = .62; p=.003) and Medical school students (M = 3.23, SD = .73;p=.004). Gymnasium and Medical school students show no difference in using compensation strategy (p =.971).

Table 3. Correlation between high school GPA in English course and strategy use

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
GPA	.036	.445**	.059	.409**	-.131	.237*

** p < .001; * p < .005

Table 3 shows that there is positive moderate correlation between cognitive ($r = .445$; $p < .001$) (e.g., analyzing, synthesizing, reasoning, critical thinking), and metacognitive ($r = .409$; $p < .001$) (e.g., planning, monitoring, evaluating their learning, self-regulation) strategy use and high-school English course GPA. Likewise, there is positive weak correlation between social ($r = .237$; $p < .005$) (e.g., asking for clarification, cooperating with peers) strategy use and GPA. On the other hand, the use of memory, compensation and affective strategies shows no statistically significant correlation with GPA.

5. Discussion

Although unrelated to any specific scores, Wenden (1988) extensively discusses metacognition (plan, monitor, and evaluate learning) in SLA., while Oxford (1990) discusses the relevance of metacognitive strategies and their impact on success. Numerous studies have shown that cognitive and metacognitive strategies are the most frequently used among learners, with slight differences between first and second ranked.

The respondents in our research reported that the most frequently used are the metacognitive and cognitive strategies with a slight difference, and followed by social strategies. Our findings

are in line with Lestari and Yudi Wahyudin (2020) research who found that metacognitive strategies are the most frequently used. Similar findings were obtained by Neman and Rolangon (2024); Marto, Marzuki & Rusdin (2021); Bećirović, Brdarević-Čeljo & Polz (2021), Sukarni (2019). Aziz & Shah (2020) found high preference for cognitive and metacognitive among respondents. Rahman (2020) found metacognitive and compensation strategies as the most frequently used, followed by social strategies. The research conducted by Nadif (2025), found metacognitive strategies as first ranked.

We also found that affective strategies are the least frequently used strategies. The same was found by O'Malley & Chamot, Lestari and Yudi Wahyudin (2020), Bećirović, Brdarević-Čeljo & Polz (2021), Aziz & Shah (2020) as well. However, the findings are contrary to Sukying (2021), who claims that affective strategies are the most frequently used.

Our findings show positive significant correlation between metacognitive strategy use and GPA. In line with this are the research conducted by Neman & Rolangon (2024), Laksmita (2017), Habók & Magyar (2018), Sukarni (2019) which found a positive and significant correlation between the use of LLS and English achievement.

Regarding the differences of strategy use among students of different high schools, the findings might indicate the impact of educational background or the curricula employed. Oxford (1994) claims that prior educational experiences are regarded as cultural background and can influence strategy choice. The same is emphasized by Chamot & Kupper (1989) who state that prior language study is among the factors influencing strategy choice. In terms of cultural background, Chamot (2004; 2005) emphasizes that the values the educational system embeds can influence how language learning tasks are interpreted and the strategies that are valued or deemed appropriate.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the research was to examine LLS used most frequently by university students and their relationship to English course success in high school. It was revealed that metacognitive strategies are most frequently used by students. The findings were in line with previous research by Lestari and Yudi Wahyudin (2020), Neman and Rolangon (2024), Nadif (2020) and Bećirović et al. (2021). Further, a statistically significant correlation was found between metacognitive strategy use and GPA in English course, supporting the conclusions of Habók & Magyar (2018) and Sukarni (2019).

In line with other studies (O'Malley & Chamot,1990; Lestari and Yudi Wahyudin, 2020;, Bećirović, Brdarević-Čeljo & Polz, 2021; Aziz & Shah, 2020), this research also found that affective strategies are the least used. On the other hand, the differences among students of different high school may be explained by their educational background, context or curricula, as noted by Oxford (1994) and Chamot (2004; 2005).

In regard to pedagogical implications, professors should become aware of the benefits of strategy-based teaching in general, as well as teaching particular strategies such as cognitive and metacognitive, since they are closely related to higher academic achievement.

In terms of limitations, the research included a small sample size and a limited number of departments. This does not allow generalization of findings. Additionally, the survey was conducted only through a self-reported questionnaire not followed by any qualitative analysis of the obtained data. Further research should focus on larger sample size, different backgrounds, mixed methods and the like.

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