

**LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF TERTIARY EFL LEARNERS –
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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Abstract

The research is a comparative study of the analyses of language learning strategies used by students of the University of Tetovo (UT) and an earlier study (Dragoescu, 2014; Arslan & Dragoescu, 2012) conducted with students from Romania and Turkey. In their study, Dragoescu and Arslan compared learning strategies of tertiary English as a foreign language (EFL) employed by learners at Banat University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine “Michael I of Romania” from Timisoara (Romania) and the Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Turkey).

The project aimed at drawing a parallel between the language learning strategies preferred by students from the Romanian and Turkish universities. Also, it assessed the effectiveness of students' achieved levels of EFL in correspondence to the frequent learning skills which they have developed. The current study, likewise, has used the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) developed by Oxford (1999) to examine the strategies preferred by learners from the UT by looking at similarities and differences between the study groups: learners from Romania, Macedonia and Turkey.

Key words: *Comparative study, English language teaching, learning strategies, tertiary.*

Përmbledhje

Ky punim paraqet një studim krahasues të analizës së përdorimit të strategjive të mësimin të gjuhës angleze të studentëve të Universitetit të Tetovës (UT) dhe një studimi (Dragoescu, 2014, Arslan & Dragoescu, 2012) të realizuar me studentë nga Rumania dhe Turqia. Në studimin e tyre, Dragoescu dhe Arslan krahasuan strategjitë e mësimin të gjuhës angleze në nivelin universitar, të studentëve nga Universiteti Banat të Shkencave Bujqësore dhe Mjekësisë Veterinare "Michael I të Rumanisë" nga Timishoara (Rumani) dhe Universiteti Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart (Turqi).

Projekti synonte të bënte një paralele midis strategjive të mësimin të gjuhës angleze të preferuara nga studentët e universiteteve rumune dhe turke. Gjithashtu, ai vlerësoi efektivitetin e niveleve të arritura të studentët, në përputhje me aftësitë e të mësuarit që ata kanë zhvilluar. Studimi aktual po ashtu ka përdorur SILL (Inventari i strategjisë për mësimin e gjuhëve) të zhvilluar nga Oxfordi (1999) për të shqyrtuar strategjitë e preferuara nga studentët në UT, duke shikuar ngjashmëritë dhe dallimet mes grupeve të studimit: studentët nga Rumania, Maqedonia dhe Turqia.

Fjalët kyçe: *Studim krahasues, mësimdhënie në gjuhën angleze, strategji mësimore, niveli universitar.*

Introduction

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been a focus of attention since the early 80s. One of the most prominent scholars dealing with them is undoubtedly Oxford (1990, 2003, 2011), but also others (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Dornyei, & Skehan, 2003; Griffiths, 2008; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Rasekh & Ranjbar, 2003; Vann & Abraham, 1990; Dragoescu, 2014; Arslan & Dragoescu, 2012; Kamberi, 2012; 2013).

Throughout these years, language learning strategies have been defined and categorized into various categories. Chamot & O'Malley (1990) have defined that as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p.1). They have classified strategies into three categories; Metacognitive, Cognitive, Social/affective strategies. The first group deals with awareness raising and the students' ability to think about their learning and evaluate their own learning. The second group deals with learning and cognition, which refers acquisition and retention. The last group on the other hand,

deals with working with others and enhancing learning, as well as dealing with stress in the process of learning.

Another noticeable scholar was, Rebecca Oxford (1990) who published one of the most influential books; *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*, strategies are defined as “specific actions learners take to compete a task” and has included the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)*, a questionnaire which has been used ever since. She has divided strategies into six categories:

Cognitive—making associations between new and already known information;

Mnemonic—making associations between new and already known information through use of formula, phrase, verse or the like;

Metacognitive—controlling own cognition through the co-ordination of the planning, organization and evaluation of the learning process;

Compensatory—using context to make up for missing information in reading and writing;

Affective—regulation of emotions, motivation and attitude toward learning;

Social—the interaction with other learners to improve language learning and cultural understanding.

(1990:12-16)

Arslan et al. (2012) state that promoting the usage of language learning strategies and raising student awareness, will impact student independent learning, thus make students more autonomous learners. This is an indication that language teachers have to promote language learning strategies with their students by using qualitative or quantitative approaches, therefore, narratives or questionnaires to introducing language learning strategies. The following study has used questionnaires to introduce LLS and interviews in order to promote language learning strategy use.

Methodology

The foundation for this paper

In an effort to help my students learn more easily, become more independent learners and life-long learners, the SILL has been used to assess students’ preferred language learning strategies as described by Oxford (see section 1 above). The aim was to analyze students’ preferred ways of learning. The second part of the study aimed at comparing these results to the analyses of language learning strategies used by students of the (Dragoescu, 2014; Arslan & Dragoescu, 2012) conducted with students from Romania and Turkey.

Research questions

Based on my professional teaching interest and informed by the emerging findings reported in literature review above, the research questions addressed in this paper include:

What are the most frequently used LLSs among students of the University of Tetovo?

What are the differences and similarities of the students from the UT and those from the study reported in Romania and Turkey?

The study

The study reported in this paper was undertaken with 21 (n=21) students representing 38% of the possible cohort. Volunteer, students were invited to take the SILL online questionnaire, on Google docs. The results of students' responses were analyzed using statistical procedures, frequencies were calculated and compared. The second stage of the study was the comparison between students of the three universities' responses. Finally, inferences have been made in order to interpret the results.

Participants

Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 21 subjects who participated in this study volunteered from the students who were attending my English Language Teaching Methodology course in the English department of the University of Tetovo (n=21). Participants ranged in age from 21 - 22 years old. The gender of the respondents was not a variable discussed in this paper.

Instruments

Seeking to analyze UTs students' preferred language learning strategies, the study was quantitative on its nature-only the student questionnaire has been used. Whereas the qualitative part of the study consisted of the comparison between the three study groups. As stated elsewhere, the instrument of this study was Oxford (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* (see section 1). The instrument constitutes of fifty questions, divided into six categories focusing on respective areas: Cognitive, Mnemonic, Metacognitive, Compensatory, Affective and Social strategies. Students had to choose on a five point Likert scale questionnaire: 1. Never or almost never true of me 2. Usually not true of me 3. Somewhat true of me 4. Usually true of me 5. Always or almost always true of me.

Data collection and analyses

Data derived from the quantitative instrument were analyzed using frequency statistical procedures, percentages were calculated and interpreted. Finally, results were compared to the ones reported by the earlier studies conducted in Romania and Turkey (ibid. 2012, 2014).

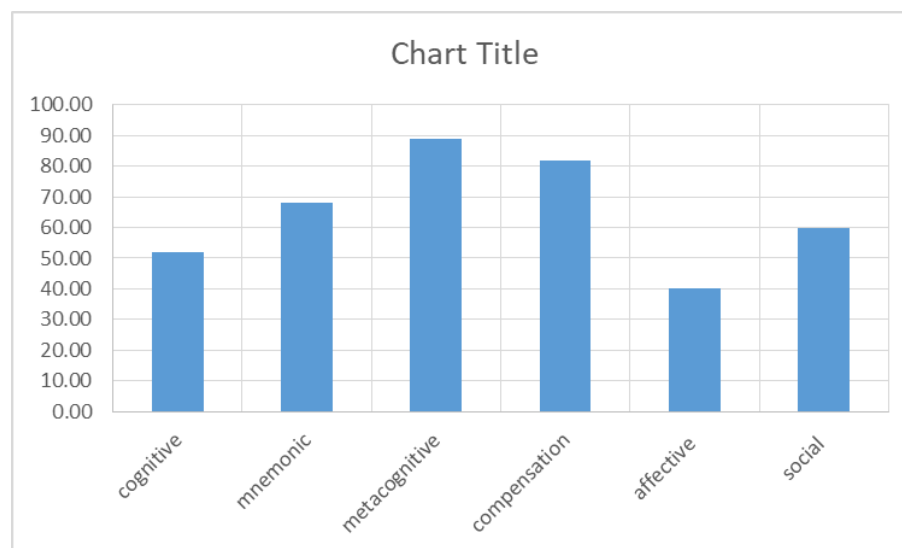
RESULTS

As stated in the previous section (see section 2), the study used the SILL questionnaire to collect data. The results were analyzed using statistical analyses, by comparing responses and percentages. Following the quantitative analyses, results were interpreted by using inferential statistics Fraenkel& Wallen (2003). To draw conclusions.

The results of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning of the students of the University of Tetovo

As stated previously (see section 2.1 and 2.2) the study aimed to analyze the language learning strategies preferred by students of the UT. The results of the study have shown that students of the University of Tetovo use a variety of LLS (see table 2 below).

Table 2. Summary of SILL responses



Based on the questionnaire results, it appears that the most frequent strategies preferred by the students of the UT are metacognitive and compensation strategies. This is an indication that students are using direct and indirect strategies. Indirect strategies have been grouped according to Oxford (1998) including metacognitive, affective and social strategies. According to the questionnaire results, although metacognitive strategies are on the top of the list based on frequency (90%), affective strategies are on the other side of the list, being the lowest.

This is an indication that learners on one side use *metacognitive strategies* which help them plan, manage, monitor and evaluate their learning (Chamot & O'Malley, 1990); while on the other lack affective strategies. The lack of *affective strategies* is an indication that students do not know how to control their anxiety. As suggested by Krashen (1982) affective strategies focus on motivation, self-confidence and anxiety (p.31). This is probably related to the students' background, primary and secondary education in which more traditional teaching methods are used.

This is an indication for teachers to focus more on these strategies and help students control their emotional intelligence. The last group of indirect learning strategies includes social strategies which are also used by a large number of students (60%). This is an indication that students collaborate with others and ask for information from peers. According to Oxford (1990), these students are able to learn more on the culture of the target language. The usage of direct language learning strategies on the other hand, seems to be more preferred by respondents.

Compensation strategies are seen on the top of the list among others (82%), followed by memory/mnemonic strategies (68%) and cognitive strategies (62%). Using compensation strategies is an indication that students are able to use paraphrasing, making guesses or even using body language to communicate in the target language. These strategies are also regarded as communication strategies and help learners get their ideas through in speaking and writing.

Memory or mnemonic strategies, the second most frequent group used by respondents is an indication that learners of the UT, make associations between existing and newly acquired information. However, Adams (2006), stated in Arslan et al. (ibid.) describes these as surface analyses unlike cognitive strategies, they do not make in depth analyses of information, hence, do not contribute to the development of autonomy in language learning. She continues by asserting that using cognitive strategies shows conscious awareness (p. 139), this however, refers to a more analytical approach of the target language by focusing on rules and correct pronunciation, a characteristic of the more traditional approaches to language teaching and

learning. To answer research question one, the most frequently used LLSs among student from the UT are metacognitive strategies amongst the indirect learning strategies, whereas compensation strategies among the direct language learning strategies.

Compared to Arslan et. al's study (ibid.) the most commonly used LLSs appear to be *social* and *cognitive* strategies in Romanian students and *memory* and *metacognitive* strategies in Turkish students. Therefore, it was concluded that the participants preferred social and cognitive strategies in the case of Romanian students, but memory and metacognitive ones in the case of Turkish students. Student from the UT on the other hand, tend to favor *metacognitive* and *compensation* strategies.

This is an indication that students from the UT, like their Turkish counterparts, prefer metacognitive strategies, which is an indication that they are able to plan and organize their learning. What was similar in all three studies, is that, affective strategies were among the least preferred LLSs, an aspect that should be considered by all parties. Teachers are suggested to make students aware of these study results and contribute to the development of strategy usage and awareness raising amongst students and teachers in all three countries.

Conclusion and recommendations

Sample size is recognized as a substantial barrier to meaningful quantitative interpretation of the data from this study to this point. While analysis suggests significant difference between the study groups, students from UT, Macedonia and participants from the Banat University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "Michael I of Romania" from Timisoara (Romania) and the Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Turkey), there are also similarities among the three study groups.

Based on the LLS questionnaire results, students from the UT seem to have similarities with participants from the Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Turkey). Using metacognitive strategies as the most frequent ones among Turkish and students from the UT shows that students are more introverted learners and rather think about their own learning rather than sharing their feelings. Contrary, Romanian students seem to have developed a more cognitive approach to learning, therefore have rated these strategies among the most preferred ones.

Most significantly, this study has also shown similarities among the study groups, which is an indication that historical background, where more traditional teaching has taken place in the past studies, primary and secondary education of the learners, has contributed to these results, the lack of affective strategies.

Therefore, teachers of all three countries are urged to offer learner training in which these results are shared and strategies for improvement are offered. One of these could be developing learner autonomy and independent learning, which probably implies that there is a need of organizing training for students in order to become more autonomous learners. Harmer (2001) in his book *towards learner autonomy*, among others suggests “learner training” to help learners become more autonomous learners, in this way, as Benson has claimed learners will gain „charge“ or „responsibility“ (Benson, p. 47).

In conclusion, future research in this area needs to address the autonomous learning, part of which is language learning strategy training, and research designs conducted over an extended period of time and with a larger sample to confirm factors potentially affecting reliability and validity. The aspects identified in this paper seem likely to shed light on future pedagogical approaches not only in Macedonia, Romania and Turkey but in the wider world also.

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