

Language Learning Strategy Use of Saudi EFL Students in an Intensive English Learning Context

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Abstract

This study investigates the type and frequency of language learning strategies used by Saudi EFL students. The subjects were 701 male and female Saudi EFL students enrolled in an intensive English language program at the University of Ha'il. The Oxford Strategies Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) was used with some modifications. The study seeks to extend our knowledge by examining the relationship between the use of language learning strategies (LLS) and gender and proficiency level. The results revealed that the students used language learning strategies with low to medium frequency. They preferred to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies the most, whereas they showed the least use of affective strategies and memory strategies. The findings of the study showed that there was no significant gender difference in the use of language learning strategies except for social strategies, as where females reported using them significantly more than males. Female students also tend to use overall language learning strategies more often than males. Moreover, the results revealed that highly proficient students used all six categories more than low-proficiency students. The paper concludes by recommending that more training should be given in using all strategies by embedding them in regular classroom activities. Suggestions are offered for future research.

Keywords: language learning strategies, English as a foreign language, intensive English learning, strategy inventory for language learning (SILL), cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies

1. Introduction

For the last twenty years, much research in the field of second language (L2) learning and teaching has shifted from instructional methods to learner characteristics. Along with this new shift in interest, questions about how learners process new information and what kind of strategies they employ to understand, learn, or remember the information have become a primary concern of researchers in foreign language learning. This shift in focus from teachers to learners can be seen in the development of a learner-centered, self-directed, communicative approach, and second language research efforts have increasingly been directed to learning strategies used by L2 learners. See Wenden and Rubin (1987), Cohen (1998), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Green (1995), McDonough (1995), Dreyer and Oxford (1996), Oxford (2004), Al-Otaibi (2004), Hong-Namand and Leavell (2006), Griffiths (2007), Lee (2010), Paredes (2010), Leung (2011), and Al-Natour (2011). The reason for this shift of research focus is, as claimed by Schmitt (1997: 199-200), that "there was awareness that aptitude was not the governing factor in language learning success implying that language achievement depends quite heavily on the individual learner's endeavours. This led to greater interest in how individual learners approach and control their own learning and use of language."

In most research on language learning strategies (LLSs), the primary concern has been "identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language" (Wenden and Rubin, 1987: 19). However, this approach was criticised in the 1980s (see Skehan, 1989) as the more account is taken in recent research on learner variables, as compare also Rubin (1975) and Naiman et al. (1978), among others. LLSs, for the most part, are relatively easy to use and have the potential to be taught, with positive effect, to learners who are unacquainted with their applications (Rubin and Thompson, 1982).

Despite the great number of studies that have investigated language learning strategies within the ESL context, few studies have examined the use of learning strategies in the Arabic EFL context (see Al-Otaibi, 2004; El-Dib,

2004; Khalil, 2005; Shmais, 2003; Al-Buainain, 2010; Abu-Radwan, 2011). In the Saudi context, only one study (Al-Otaibi, 2004) investigated the use of LLSs.

Hence, the purpose of the current study is to fill the gap in this area of research by exploring the use of LLSs by Saudi EFL students enrolled in an intensive English language learning program. Moreover, this study will investigate the relationship between LLSs and a number of variables including gender and language proficiency as measured by the Oxford placement test. Research has indicated that these two variables, which are believed to have a considerable influence on the process of language learning and to contribute to considerable variability in strategy preference (see Green and Oxford, 1995; Lan and Oxford, 2003; Magogwe and Oliver, 2007; Abu-Radwan, 2011).

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the fields of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and adult education by presenting the perspectives of Saudi EFL students studying English in an intensive English program. Teachers and curriculum designers may find this research useful for improving curriculum design and classroom methodology related to the language learner strategies used by Saudi EFL students, and they may be cognizant of the preferred learning strategies used by these Saudi students that have the potential to empower learners to become more independent and aware of their learning behaviors. This study is also significant because it supports Oxford's (1990a) taxonomy for LLS, which constitutes an important and accurate framework to classify the learning strategies of language learners such as the Saudi learners in this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies have been used for thousands of years, although researchers have formally discovered and named them only recently. For example, there are well-known examples of mnemonic or memory devices used in ancient times by storytellers to help them remember their lines (Oxford, 1990).

Language learning strategies (LLSs) are important because research suggests that training students to use LLSs can help them to become successful language learners. LLSs enable students to gain a large measure of responsibility and to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. LLSs encompass a wide range of behaviour that can help the development of language competence in many ways. They are important, moreover, because learners need to keep on learning even when they are no longer in a formal classroom setting (Crookall, 1988, cited in Oxford, 1989). They also help learners to assimilate new information into their existing mental schemata. Oxford (1990) also included the affective factor in her definition of LLSs that they can be used for other purposes such as making learning 'more enjoyable'. Since the late 1970s, researchers have formulated different definitions for language learning strategies.

Table 1.

| Source | Definition |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Stern (1983: 405) | "In our view strategy is best reserved for general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach employed by the language learner, leaving learning techniques as the term to refer to particular forms of observable learning behaviour, more or less consciously employed by the learner." |
| Chamot (1987: 71) | "Learner strategies are techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information." |
| Wenden (1987: 6) | "[T]he term learner strategies refers to language learning behaviours learners actually engage in to learn and regulate the learning of a second language." |
| Rubin (1987: 23) | "Learning strategies are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly." |
| Cohen (1990: 5) | Learning strategies are viewed as learning process, which are selected by the learner consciously but are applied to specific language activities." |
| O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 1) | Learning strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information." |
| Oxford (1990: 8) | Learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations." |
| Oxford and Cohen (1992: 1) | "Learning strategies are defined as steps or actions taken by learners to improve the development of their language steps." |

Cohen (1998: 4) “Language learning and language use strategies can be defined as those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information.”

2.1 Classification of Language Learning Strategies

The classification systems of LLSs differ based on contrasting criteria (Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990a; Rubin, 1981). Each existing classification system involves an implicit theory about the nature of L2 learning strategies and even, to some degree, about L2 learning in general. For the purpose of this study, Oxford's (1990a) taxonomy of LLS was used. According to Jones (1998), Oxford's (1990a) framework developed a system of language learning strategies that is more comprehensive and detailed compared to other models. This taxonomy is systematic in linking individual strategies as well as strategy groups with each of the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing), which are gained incrementally during the language development process.

2.1.1 Oxford's Taxonomy

Oxford (1990a) divided strategies into two main groups: direct and indirect. Direct learning strategies directly involve the target language. Indirect learning strategies support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language (Oxford, 1990a).

2.1.1.1 Direct Strategies

Oxford's (1990a) direct learning strategies can be further divided into the following subgroups: memory, cognitive, and compensation. Memory strategies reflect very simple principles, such as arranging things in order, making associations, and reviewing. These principles all involve *meaning*; therefore, for the purpose of learning a new language or for learning to take place, the arrangements and associations must be personally meaningful to the learner, and the material to be reviewed must have significance (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985; Littlewood, 1984).

Cognitive strategies are essential in learning a new language; these strategies range from repeating to analyzing expressions to summarising (Oxford, 1990a). With all their variety, cognitive strategies are unified by a common function: the manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner (Dansereau, 1985; Rigney, 1978). These types of strategies are typically found to be the most popular strategies with language learners (Chamot, 1987; Wenden, 1987). An example of a cognitive strategy is comparing elements (sounds, vocabulary, grammar, etc.) of the new language with elements of one's first language to determine similarities and differences. Compensation strategies, such as guessing a word, are intended to make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar and, specifically, of vocabulary. Beginners are not the only ones who use guessing: advanced learners and even native speakers use guessing when they have not heard something well enough. These compensation strategies for language production help learners to use the language by overcoming knowledge gaps and continuing to communicate authentically, thus becoming more fluent in what they already know (Oxford, 1990a).

2.1.1.2 Indirect Strategies

Oxford's (1990a) indirect learning strategies can be divided into three subgroups: metacognitive, affective, and social. Indirect strategies support and manage language learning, often without involving the target language directly. Metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their own cognition and to plan, focus, and evaluate their language learning process as they move toward communicative competence. For example, learners seek out or create opportunities to practice the new language in naturalistic situations (e.g., joining a conversation club).

Affective strategies develop the self-confidence and perseverance needed for learners to involve themselves actively in language learning (Oxford, 1990a), such as lowering anxiety levels by laughing at their own mistakes. Social strategies provide increased interaction and more empathetic understanding since they occur among and between people (Canale, 1983). An example of a social strategy is asking the speaker to repeat, paraphrase, slow down, and so forth to aid comprehension. Language is a form of social behavior, a communication; learning a language, therefore, involves people, and appropriate social strategies are important in this process (Canale, 1983). Despite disagreements in classifying LLSs, these strategies help language learners to take control of their learning, be more competent, and, most important, become autonomous (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Vandergrift, 2002).

Oxford's SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) has been used extensively to collect data on large numbers of language learners around the world (Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003; Lan & Oxford, 2003;

Peacock & Ho, 2003; Al-Otaibi, 2004; Nisbet, Riazi, 2007; Hong-Namand and Leavell, 2006; Griffiths, 2007; Lee, 2010; Paredes, 2010; Leung, 2011; and Al-Natour, 2011). According to Ehrman and Oxford (1995), the 80-item questionnaire has been used with over 5,700 language learners. In addition to their use in research on patterns of language learning strategies, some researchers have advocated the instruction of these strategies to help less successful language learners and to enhance learners' effectiveness in learning by consciously applying these strategies (Chamot, 2005, cited in Leung, 2011).

The fact that numerous studies have established a significant relationship between strategies and language proficiency as measured in a variety of ways gives the instrument high validity, according to Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995). However, the reliability of the instrument was questioned by Woodrow (2005, cited in Abu Radwan, 2011), who pointed out that, while the scale has high overall reliability, there is no evidence to support the six-fold classification of LLSs in the SILL in the form of subclass reliabilities.

Many studies have widely used SILL to explore the effect of various variables on strategy use (see Dreyer and Oxford, 1996; Park, 1997; Yang, 1999; Khalil, 2005; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006; Abu-Radwan, 2011), and the results showed significant variation in strategy preference due to gender and proficiency differences. In this study, the effect of gender and proficiency level will be explored, and in the following discussion, we will shed light on some studies that examined these two variables.

Several studies have established the existence of gender differences in the use of language learning strategies. The results have usually indicated that females are more frequent users of strategies (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Green and Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1993). Green and Oxford (1995) found that females use strategies more frequently than males. Moreover, gender differences are reflected in the types of strategy used by females and males. Females show more use of social learning strategies (Politzer, 1983; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989), more frequent use of formula rule-based practice strategies and conversational or input strategies (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989), and more memory and metacognitive strategies (Khalil, 2005) than their male counterparts. Gender differences appear most evident in the use of socially based strategies such as group learning. However, gender difference findings of greater strategy use by females may be tempered by the context and/or culture of the language learning. For example, in a study of adult Vietnamese refugees, Tran (1988) found that males were more likely to use a variety of learning strategies than females. Refugees are a population typically characterised by "survival learning" wherein men are highly motivated to learn English for survival needs (e.g., supporting their family in the new society). Wharton (2000) did not find any effects of gender in either the number or types of strategies used by bilingual foreign language learners in Singapore. This may be attributable to an overall superiority in language learning ability and expertise on the part of bilingual students that may have equalised any potential gender differences in strategy use (Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006).

2.2 Research Questions

- 1) What kind of language learning strategies do Saudi students learning English in an intensive English language program use, and how often do they use those strategies?
- 2) Are male and female students different or similar in their language learning strategies?
- 3) Is there any relationship between strategy use and proficiency level?

2.3 Purpose of the Study

This study investigates the overall LLS use by Saudi EFL students enrolled in an intensive English language program at the University of Ha'il in Saudi Arabia. In the literature, little research has investigated LSS use in a program where the students study English as a foreign language in a very intensive program. Furthermore, few studies have investigated the use of LLSs in the Saudi context (Al-Otaibi, 2004).

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

A total of 701 male (61.8%) and female (38.2%) EFL students enrolled in an intensive English language program at the preparatory year at the University of Ha'il in Saudi Arabia participated in the current study. The age of the students ranged from 18 to 25 years, with a mean of 19 years. They were selected randomly to participate in the study. The participants were from two different levels in which they were placed according to their placement test scores: elementary and pre-intermediate. The students move up when they successfully complete a fifteen-week course. In each level, they receive instruction that covers reading, writing, listening, and speaking. All the subjects had studied English for at least six years in the intermediate and secondary schools. 98% of the subjects reported that they have never visited an English-speaking country.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Questionnaire

A slightly modified version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), version 7, (ESL, EFL) (Oxford, 1990) was used to examine the types and frequency of use of language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). The SILL has been employed as a key instrument in numerous studies. Studies have reported reliability coefficients for the SILL ranging from .85 to .98, making it a trusted measure for gauging students' reported language learning strategy use (Bremner, 1998; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Park, 1997; Sheorey, 1999; Wharton, 2000; Al-Otaibi, 2004; Griffiths, 2007; Paredes, 2010; Leung, 2011). A Cronbach's alpha calculated for this study also revealed acceptable reliability (.89). In the SILL, language learning strategies are grouped into six categories for assessment: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. The Arabic version of the questionnaire was discussed and checked by professional Arabic teachers to avoid any ambiguity in the wording of the questionnaire (a problem that can lead to confusion and errors of interpretation on the part of the respondents) and to ensure content validity. The reviewers also verified that the terminology used was definitely known to the participants and understood. The questionnaire consisted of 50 items to which students were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5. A range of 3.5-5 is thought to reflect high use of that strategy, 2.5-3.4 medium use, and 1.0-2.4 low use (Oxford, 1990).

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered to the students by the classroom teacher during a regular class period (spring 2011-2012). The full descriptive instructions regarding the procedures of administration were provided to and discussed with the class instructors before the administration. The students were told that there were no right or wrong answers to any question, that their confidentiality was secured, and that their responses would be used for research purposes only. They were also informed that, while their participation would not affect their grades, they still had the option not to participate.

The data was analysed using SPSS 19.0. Frequency, means, and standard deviation were employed to identify the strategies used, as well as the participants' demographic information. Two-way repeated-measure ANOVA was used with a *post hoc* comparison test to investigate the variation in strategies used by the participants.

4. Results and Discussion

This section provides an interpretation of the findings of the study and gives a report and analysis of strategy use among Saudi EFL students in the preparatory year at the University of Ha'il. Then, the discussion focuses on the interpretation of the relationship between strategy use and proficiency level and gender.

Table 2. Frequency rating of LLSs used by all subjects of different levels and genders

| Categories | Descriptive statistics | | | | Inferential statistics | |
|---------------|------------------------|------|------|------|------------------------|-------|
| | Min | Max | Mean | SD | Gender | Level |
| Cognitive | 1 | 4.86 | 2.87 | 1.47 | .820 | .034 |
| Metacognitive | 1 | 4.75 | 2.85 | 1.04 | .084 | .001 |
| Social | 1 | 5 | 2.79 | .090 | .012 | .025 |
| Compensate | 1 | 2.76 | 2.76 | 1.02 | .102 | .009 |
| Affective | 1 | 2.93 | 2.62 | .087 | .737 | .017 |
| Memory | 1 | 2.59 | 2.58 | 1.25 | .173 | .034 |

4.1 Overall Strategy Use

The results indicated that the language learning strategy use of Saudi EFL students in the preparatory year, as measured by the SILL, was moderate with an overall mean of 2.76 and standard deviation 1.23. Thus, none in absolute terms is rated 'frequent'. This result is line with Al-Otaibi (2004), who found that his Saudi students reported using LLSs on average. However, this average was somewhat lower than those obtained in other populations that have taken the SILL in other countries (see Osanai, 2000; Yang, 1995; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006). Based on this study finding, the students in the current study seem to be relatively less sophisticated language learning strategy users, using all six categories of strategies at moderate levels.

Two possible explanations can be offered for this finding. First, the participants in this study English in an EFL setting and do not need it for daily life. Thus, it was not urgent for them to use most types of strategies as it is for

learners in an ESL setting. Second, it might indicate that this sample did not consist of language learners who were as sophisticated as other groups in other contexts, and this may be due in part to the lack of an input-rich environment.

With regard to each specific category of strategies, we can clearly observe some relevant differences in the preference for cognitive strategy use. The cognitive strategies were reported to be used more than any other type of strategies with a frequency rating of 2.87 and a SD of 1.47. These differences were corroborated through one-way repeated-measure ANOVA, which showed significant differences in the use of LLSs by all subjects ($F=51.041, p=.001$).

To determine where the difference lies between the six categories, the Bonferroni adjusted multiple comparison was applied. The results showed that cognitive and metacognitive strategies are used significantly more than all other categories ($p=.001$). On the other hand, affective and memory strategies were reported as the least frequently used strategies.

Oxford (1990) suggested that cognitive strategies are essential in learning a new language because these strategies work directly on incoming information. In the current study, the participants adopted some cognitive strategies, such as watching movies in English (mean: 3.9), listening to native speakers of English (mean: 3.5), and studying English grammar (mean: 3.4). According to Oxford (1990), cognitive strategies are typically found to be the most popular strategies among language learners.

The second most frequently used strategies among the subjects were metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies are actions that allow learners to control and coordinate their own learning. The subjects in this study reported that they have clear goals for improving their English skills (mean: 3.30) and learning from their mistakes (mean: 4.00). However, a small number of participants reported planning time in their schedule to study English (mean: 2.03), and a relatively similar number reported looking for people with whom they could talk in English (mean: 2.08).

The intensive learning environment of the program in the ELC in the preparatory year could be a prime contributor in several ways to the preferred use of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In terms of metacognitive strategies, learners have a strong instrumental motivation for learning English. Unlike learners who might enroll in a foreign language course for fun or self-advancement or because a language course is required, the students were learning English to advance their academic and professional lives. The (self-imposed) threat of failing the program was a strong motive for taking control of their learning. Accomplishing high scores in an English language course will enable them to choose the major they want in a college of engineering or computer science. Efficient planning and self-monitoring of one's learning progress by the student are instrumental in achieving their goal of completion. As Pintrich and Garcia (1994) observed, metacognitive knowledge and improvements in academic performance went hand in hand. The high-frequency use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies seemed to prove that they are vital for successful language (Oxford 1990b: 136) and in helping them to seek practice opportunities.

The findings of the high-frequency use of cognitive and metacognitive strategy were consistent with previous studies such as Nisbet (2002) and Han and Lin (2000). Furthermore, studies conducted with Arab students confirmed the findings of the current study (see Abu Shamis, 2003; Aziz Khalil, 2005; Riazi, 2007; Al-Buainain, 2010). It is also consistent with studies that investigated Asian students in Japan, China, Korea, and Taiwan (e.g., Sheorey, 1999; Liu, 2004; Chang, 2011).

Social strategies involve interaction with other people, such as asking for help or clarification or practicing with other learners. In this study, the subjects reported using social strategies as the third most frequently used type of strategy. In a study of the vocabulary learning strategies of Saudi students, Alhaysony (2012) reported that social strategies were popular among her subjects. The majority of the subjects in the current study tried to ask others to slow down or repeat when they did not understand something in English (mean: 3.33). The intensive learning environment of the English language programme (ELP) for the preparatory year may play a major role in the preference for the use and selection of social strategies. Many students showed a strong preference for learning with others by asking questions and cooperating with peers. Furthermore, in the ELC environment, native English speakers are around the students, and the instructions in the ELC strongly encourage and support more interactive learning for the sake of developing greater linguistic fluency. The ELC has established an English language club where the students can practice their English with their colleagues and teachers. The main purpose of this club is to encourage the students to be more sociable and interact with their peers and teachers, which is expected to help in improving their English skills. Furthermore, the ELC offers tutorial classes for students to attend in their free time to seek help from the teachers about various issues related to English. I believe that all

these factors contributed to the high use of social strategies on the part of the students. These findings are in line with those of Phillips (1999), whose study of Asian students also enrolled in college IEPs showed increased use of social strategies relative to other strategies. Moreover, it is similar to that observed among students from Asian and Arab countries such Al-Buainain (2010), Tse (2011), and Chang (2011).

Compensation strategies were reported to be the fourth most frequently used strategies in the current study. They allow learners to make up for gaps in their knowledge when producing or comprehending the new language (Al-Otaibi, 2004). Language learners use compensation strategies such as guessing, using gestures, and using synonyms to maintain good communication, even when they lack a complete knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and other language elements. Similar results were reported in previous studies (see Riazi, 2007; Al-Buainain, 2010; Change, 2011).

Affective and memory strategies were reported to be the least frequently used strategies by the subjects, respectively. Affective strategies allow learners to control their motivations, attitudes, and emotions in language learning. In this study, a good number of students shared their feelings with others when they were learning English (mean: 2.87), and a relatively similar number noticed their tension or nervousness when they were studying or using English (mean: 2.86). On the other hand, few students reported that they tried to relax whenever they felt afraid of using English (mean: 2.45). Also, a small number of participants wrote down their feelings in a language learning diary (mean: 1.72). The infrequent use of affective strategies could be attributed to the fact that students are concerned about passing exams and respond to questions that were directly related to the content in the textbooks.

Memory strategies were reported as the least frequently used strategies among the students. Oxford (1990) regarded memory strategies as powerful mental tools. However, in the current study, the subjects reported memory strategies as their least frequently used types of strategies. This finding is in line with Al-Otaibi (2004), who found that his Saudi students used memory strategies infrequently. The result is also consistent with findings by Lan and Oxford (2003), Oh (1992), Yang (1993), Yang (2007), Chang (2011), and Al-Buainain (2010). On the other hand, this finding seems to be inconsistent with the belief that Saudi students prefer strategies involving memorisation as fostered by Qur'anic education and the instructional delivery systems typically employed in many Arab countries, which are frequently didactic and emphasise rote memorisation.

The development of the methodology might have influenced changes in student strategy preferences (Al-Buainain, 2010). Another possible reason is that there are variations in the definition of memory strategies. Politzer and McGroarty (1985, cited in Al-Buainain, 2010) defined memory strategies as the rote memorisation of words, phrases, and sentences. When we compared the least frequently used memory strategies in this study, we found that none of these strategies were related to rote memorisation.

4.2 Gender

Many researchers have found that females appear to use a wider range of strategies than males (e.g. Oxford et al., 1988; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Green and Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006). Strategies that focus on social interaction skills seemed to be more popular among female learners than among males (Politzer, 1983). The results of the current study revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the use any of the six categories except the social strategies, as females reported using those strategies significantly more often than males. This finding may indicate that the females in this study may know how to control their emotions during learning better than their male counterparts, which may also reflect females' emotional side in real life. Oxford et al. (1988) stated that females' increased use of social strategies might be attributed to females' greater social orientation, which often surfaces in their showing a continuing need for social approval. In another study, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) found that female learners made greater use of functional practice strategies, strategies for searching for and communicating meaning, and self-management strategies.

The absence of a gender effect on strategy use for the other five categories (cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, affective, and memory) was not expected. It should be borne in mind that other studies such as Lou (1998) and Peng (2001) showed no significant gender differences.

4.3 Proficiency Level

Many studies have shown that proficiency level does not necessarily equate with the amount of learning; more experienced language learners have been shown to use more strategies (Bremner, 1998; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Wharton, 2000). Studies that have examined the strategy use and proficiency levels of students have shown a positive relationship between the two factors (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Green & Oxford, 1995; Wharton, 2000; Al-Buainain, 2010). The findings of this study were consistent with

previous SILL studies (e.g., Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Sheorey, 1999; Al-Otaibi, 2004) in which greater overall use of language learning strategies was found among learners at more advanced proficiency levels. The results of the current study revealed that those with higher proficiency levels used all six categories significantly more than those with lower proficiency levels.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the LLS use of Saudi EFL students enrolled in an intensive English language program at the University of Ha'il to investigate factors that have been found to affect strategy use such as gender and proficiency level and to obtain additional insights from the students' statements about their own strategy use. The current study reveals a more complex pattern of strategy use than has been observed in previous studies (Green & Oxford, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Park, 1997; Abu-Radwan, 2011).

The results showed that these students were low- to medium-level users of strategies. The results in this study on strategy use indicated a high preference for cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Similar results were obtained by Shmais (2003), Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006), and Abu-Radwan, 2011), showing that, overall, the students prefer cognitive and metacognitive strategies over other types, and the least preferred strategies were affective and memory strategies. The use of metacognitive strategies must be supported in curricula design, especially through the beginning stages of learning a second/foreign language, where obtaining some type of declarative knowledge is critical to create "heightened understanding of *what* and *how* of successful language learning" (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006, p. 412).

Difficulty in dealing with anxiety related to language learning was reported by most participants. The women in the current study appeared to utilise their social networks as a means of support. While male participants apparently did not prefer to talk to their peers about their feelings, students might benefit from an opportunity to journal for a few minutes at the end of each learning session about how they felt about class and their performance on that day. This may help students to express feelings in a more private way and recognise how those feelings may have impacted the day's learning. In addition, as trust is built between teacher and student, the instructor may request access to journal entries, which would provide an additional useful source of information in mediating students' progress.

Unlike previous studies, gender did not have a significant effect overall on the use of language learning strategies except in their use of social strategies, where females reported using social strategies significantly more than males.

With regard to the effect of proficiency level on the use of LLSs, the results revealed that proficiency had a main effect on the overall strategies used by the subjects as well as on the categories. Those with higher proficiency levels used a significantly greater number of strategies more frequently than did their counterparts in lower proficiency levels in all six categories. Therefore, a linear relationship between language proficiency level and strategy use was found. Moreover, highly proficient students are concerned about communication and ask about clarification or repetition only if they think it is vital for understanding the message. Along with asking for clarification, they tend to use a combination of strategies, such as guessing from context, according to their own needs. Less proficient students, on the other hand, are more focused on understanding individual words at the expense of communication.

The findings of this study strengthened evidence from previous Saudi studies (e.g., Abou-Rokbah, 2002; Al-Nujaidi, 2003; Al-Otaibi, 2004) about the effect of the educational context on students' learning strategy use. Nevertheless, the current study failed to provide significant evidence for one of the strategies that are believed to be popular among Saudi students. This strategy relates to rote memorisation, which is fostered and rewarded by Qur'anic teaching (Al-Swelem, 1997) as well as by the examination-oriented teaching in Saudi classrooms (Abou-Rokbah, 2002). The possible explanation for this might be that the memorisation strategy that Saudi students are believed to prefer may differ from the specific memory techniques reported in the SILL.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

1) The results of the current study highlight the significance of integrating strategy training into L2 classroom instruction and into curriculum design. The teachers and students should increase their awareness of these various strategies through appropriate instruction or training for both groups. Greater student awareness about strategies can help them to become more self-confident, independent, and successful language learners (Abu-Radwan, 2011; Al-Otaibi, 2004). Oxford (2001, p. 1, as cited in Nisbet et al., 2005) emphasised the importance of such autonomy by stating that learning strategies "are aimed at self-management in language learning and self-reliance in language use".

- 2) Explicit training in strategy use is essential, as it allows students at different levels and those with different proficiency levels and learning styles to practice a wide range of these strategies that are “appropriate to different instructional task and activities that constitute an essential part of the classroom L2 experience” (Khalil, 2005, p. 115).
- 3) Practical actions can be taken by teachers in language classrooms in terms of integrating explicit and implicit strategy instructions into the regular lessons (Weaver and Chohen, 1994; Cohen et al., 1996).
- 4) The results showed that highly proficient students reported more strategy use than low-proficiency students. This indicates that learners at different levels have different needs in terms of teacher intervention in the learning process. For low-proficiency learners, the teacher needs to be explicit in developing declarative and procedural knowledge that helps to heighten understanding of the what and how of successful language learning. This metacognitive awareness of how students can control and positively impact their language learning must be supported until the crucial element of conditional knowledge is in place; only then can learners reach independence in their language learning (Paris et al., 1994).
- 5) With regard to curriculum design and material preparation, researchers have recommended that strategy training should be integrated into language curriculum (see, e.g., Khalil, 2005; Oxford, 1990; Abu-Radwan, 2011). Hence, teachers and material developers should incorporate a variety of tasks and activities that target strategies that teachers view as critical for success in learning a second language. The fact that students with different proficiency levels utilise different learning strategies must guide the development of instructional materials (Chamot & O’Malley, 1996). These materials should provide “students with further opportunities to practice a wide variety of strategies that are appropriate to different instructional tasks and activities that constitute an essential part of the classroom L2 experience” (Khalil, 2005, p. 115).
- 6) Teachers should evaluate textbooks and other materials they use to see whether they already include language learning strategies or language learning strategy training.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

It is hoped that the current study has presented valuable information to the study of LLS use by Saudi EFL learners of English. As with any other study, there are some limitations, but none of them is a threat to the validity of the research. However, these limitations seem to provide suggestions for future researchers on how the use of LLSs might be further investigated. The limitations of this study were as follows:

- 1) As the questionnaire was the main instrument in this study, its data is based on self-report, so it is possible in the strategy questionnaire that the respondents overestimated or underestimated the frequency with which they use certain strategies (Cohen, 1998).
- 2) The participants in this study were limited Saudi EFL students enrolled in an intensive English language program. This excludes undergraduate students in different years and graduate students. Furthermore, the students’ participation in our study was voluntary, as they were allowed to refuse to take part, so findings are affected by motivation bias.
- 3) The study set out to investigate the use of LLSs by Saudi EFL learners of English and the effect of gender and proficiency level on the use of LLSs both in and out of the classroom. This is not to deny the fact that factors other than gender and proficiency level may also be relevant and affect the use of LLSs. Hence, the present study is not an account of all the possible factors.
- 4) There was no attempt to measure the effectiveness/success of strategy use but only the frequency of use. We cannot tell, for example, whether high- and low-proficiency students who use the same strategy use it equally effectively.

5.3 Recommendation for Further Research

- 1) The literature review presented in this study revealed that, in the area of Arab EFL in general and Saudi EFL in particular, LLSs have not been investigated enough. Therefore, further researchers are highly recommended to conduct descriptive, experimental, and cross-sectional studies on Arab EFL learners in general and Saudi EFL students in particular. These types of studies can be expected to provide a better understanding of Arab and Saudi EFL LLS use.
- 2) Other studies should investigate the LLS use of both female and male Saudi students at different ages and educational levels (i.e., intermediate, high school, university).

- 3) Longitudinal studies would be of great value to examine the changes in LLS use over time. Factors such as the development of linguistic proficiency, information on the curriculum, and the influence of strategy instruction on EFL students' LLS use could be investigated in a broader scope.
- 4) It has been a problem to compare this study's findings with those of other studies due to the ambiguity of each study regarding the proficiency level and how it is measured. In most studies, the researcher tried to differentiate between high- and low-proficiency subjects, but the problem lies in the proficiency level in question and whether the high and low levels in a particular study are the same as those levels in another study. On this issue, Alseweed (2000) argued that there is a need for agreement among researchers on an international proficiency test allowing comparison between studies. This test might give researchers more accurate results about the subjects' real proficiency levels in different studies. This would be better than what is obtained from teacher evaluations, study exam results, or other local tests conducted by the researcher.
- 5) Investigating the effect of training on LLS use, including the success of use, is a vital issue to take into consideration in further research.
- 6) Future researchers may use multiple-method approaches such as observation, qualitative interviews, think-aloud, and diaries. Cohen and Scott (1996: 106) indicated that "researchers and teachers have a variety of assessment methods at their disposal, and these methods may be combined in any number of ways to collect the more useful strategy data for a given study. The field of language learning strategies may benefit most from a wide application of assessment methods in multiple research contexts".
- 7) More research on factors that affect strategy choice would be helpful. Learning style is an important factor, along with gender, age, nationality or ethnicity, beliefs, previous educational and cultural experiences, and learning goals.

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