Language Learning Strategies Preferences and Gender among EFL Students

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Abstract

The current study addresses the relationship between language learning strategy (LLS) and English proficiency among Saudi university students learning English as a foreign language. This paper uses Oxford's (1990) model, which includes six groups of categories. Findings of this study show that participants (88 Saudi learners) were overall medium strategy users. Metacognitive strategies were mostly used among the six categories followed by social strategies, compensation strategies, affective strategies, cognitive strategies, and memory strategies respectively. Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and Oxford Online Displacement Test (OODP) were used as tools to measure the relationship between learners' LLS preferences and their language proficiency level. Gender is also examined as an independent variable to see if it may affect the overall findings of this study. Results indicate that proficiency level and gender of the learner had no significant effect on the overall strategies used by learners. Findings of the current study suggest some recommendations and valuable implications for classroom instructors, curriculum designers, learning material developers, and educational decision makers. The study also provides some recommendations for future research and aims to achieve a valuable contribution to the existing literature found in the field of LLS and its connection with language proficiency and gender.

Keywords: Learning strategies, gender, language proficiency, foreign language learning, language skills

Introduction

Today, Saudi students need to use English language not only in their personal lives but also in their professional careers. English language is seen by Saudis as a means to facilitate their communications locally and internationally. In Saudi Arabia private and international schools, English is introduced to children in KG classes. In public schools, learning English starts a little bit further as approaching six grade. Language teachers have noticed that some students learn English as a foreign language more quickly and effectively than others. This is actually observed by other researchers who have discussed the same issue worldwide (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Researchers have categorized a number of cognitive and sociocultural aspects as contributed effectively in creating variation in foreign and second language learning (Brown, 2000). Among these variables is (LLSs), language-learning strategies which contribute significantly to the findings of such studies.

Some researchers define LLS by stating that they are "measures that students can take to promote their own learning success" (Franklin, Hodge, & Sasscer, 1977, p.24). Language learning strategies are defined as "the conscious or semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of the target language" (Cohen, 2003, p. 280). Oxford (1990) designed and developed a very comprehensive model. According to Oxford, language-learning strategies (LLS) are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p.8). Oxford's model (1990) shows a classification, which includes six groups of strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

Furthermore, Oxford developed a strategy assessment survey based on the classification categories, mentioned earlier. This survey is known as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which is considered as the most

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comprehensive tool for identifying strategy preferences of language learners in the world (Foong & Goh, 1997, Green & Oxford 1995).

The reliability and validity of (SILL) has been checked and examined by a number of researches and in various ways. This instrument has been used in 1995 in more than 42 studies involving nearly 8000 students form different parts of the world (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Based on a various number of variables including gender, attitudes, motivation, cultural background, and language proficiency, researchers' findings indicate very significant preferences in language learning strategies adopted by learners worldwide (Oxford 2001; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

Review of Literature

There are various studies which show a close connection between LLS and language proficiency as a significant variable in language acquisition research. Findings of such studies have frequently suggested an important association between LLS and English proficiency among learners of English as a foreign or second language in the world (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Moreover, learners' strategies vary according to various factors such as the cultural setting, the learner's preferences, the learning's context, and the expected language performance (Brown, 2000, Dreyer& Oxford, 1996). Such studies recommends further future research which could examine in depth the connection between LLS and language proficiency using a reliable tool that could be applied in different settings worldwide. An example of such studies is Park's (1997). Park examined the relationship between LLS and language proficiency among Korean university students. The instrument, which has been applied in Park's study, was TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language. Findings of this study suggest a close connection between LLS and English proficiency where the cognitive and social strategies were more predictive of the test scores than other strategies.

Among the recommendations of Park's study and other studies (e.g., Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Green & Oxford; Mullins, 1992, etc.), is the call for additional research to be conducted in other worldwide contexts and cultures to further examine the relationship between LLS and English proficiency. In response to this call, the current study aims to examine the LLS and English proficiency among Saudi university students where English is learned as a foreign language.

Although there are many studies conducted in different parts of the world about LLS, the Arabic Gulf region's participation in such studies is very limited. The outcome of the worldwide studies cannot be generalized to be applicable in the Gulf area, including Saudi students. Furthermore, the number of studies which investigated the use of LLS in the Arab world are very limited (Abu Shmais, 2003; Al-Shaboul, Asassfeh & Al Shaboul, 2010; McMullen, 2009).

Moreover, there are very few Arab studies that examined the relationship between gender, as a significant variable, and the language learning strategies LLS (Radwan, 2011; Rahimi & Riazi, 2007). Riazi (2007), examined the patterns of English LLS use of 120 female Arabs students majoring English at Qatar University using Oxford's (1990) SILL. The findings of this study show that students have used learning strategies with high to medium frequency. Metacognitive strategies were recorded as the highest strategies, which have been used; while the lowest ones were recorded for compensation strategies.

Another study that has been conducted in the Arab Gulf region was done by Al-Shaboul, Asassfeh, & Al Shaboul (2010). They used Oxford's (1990) SILL to explore learning strategies use of 111 learners whose majoring is English at University of Jordan. The results of this study indicated a high mean value of the use of metacognitive strategy. Similar results were found in the studies of Radwan (2011) and McMullen (2009) where metacognitive strategies scored to be the highest frequently used strategies.

Radwan (2011), examined the use of LLS of 128 students whose major is English at Oman University. In this study, results showed that students used metacognitive

strategies more than any other strategy; and the memory strategies was the least ones used by these students. Similarly, McMullen (2009) examined LLS use of 165 Saudi EFL students (males /females) in three Saudi universities. The results of this study showed that Saudi EFL learners preferred three strategies and made use of them more than the other strategies. They are social, metacognitive, and compensation strategies. However, the other three strategies were neglected and rarely used (cognitive, memory, and affective). Concerning gender, this study indicated that female learners used slightly more LLs than male learners.

To sum up, researchers conducted studies involving students learning English as a foreign language reported that most of the students used medium LLS (Abu Shmais, 2003; Germi & Baighlou, 2011; Khalil, 2005; McMullen, 2009; Radwan, 2011). The majority of the learners placed Metacognitive strategies at the top of the learning preference scale while Affective and Memory strategies were placed at the bottom of the scale (Gerami & Baighlou, 2011; Khalil, 2005; McMullen, 2009).

Moreover, researchers came up with various findings concerning the effect of LLS on gender and language proficiency. A group of researchers indicated that there is little or no significant effects of gender variable on LLS (McMullen, 2009; Radwan, 2011). Another group confirmed the close connection between LLs and gender (Abu Shmais, 2003, Gerami & Baighlou, 2011; Khalil, 2005). The case is the same concerning the effect of language proficiency on the use of LLS. Some researchers found a close influence of the language proficiency on the use of LLS (Radwan, 2011; Khalil, 2005). On the other hand, other researchers found exactly the oppsite with no significant effect of language proficiency levels on the use of LLS (Riazi, 2007).

In conclusion, the previously mentioned studies identified the relationships between LLS and language proficiency in relation to the effect of the variable of gender. These studies guided the current research to examine and identify this kind of relation, as well as how significant the effects would be on Saudi university students learning English as a foreign language in their university preparatory year. It is hoped that the

current study will shed light on such issues and the findings would contribute to the overall outcome of the studies in this field.

Research Questions

1. What are the general patterns of English LLS used by Saudi university students?
2. What are the connections between language learning strategies LLS and Foreign language proficiency?
3. Which strategies of the six language learning strategies are more connected and correlated with foreign language proficiency?
4. Which strategies are favored by which gender? In other words, what is the relationship between LLS, Language proficiency and gender?

Methodology

Participants

Subjects of this study were nearly 88 students of King Abdulaziz University (KAU), in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. They were all enrolled in the English language institution for the first year as a university requirement step. The sample consisted of a volunteer pool of 48 females and 40 males, whose ages ranged from 19-24 at that time of data collection. All participants had received at least seven years of English instruction at the middle and high schools plus the current year in the English language institution. When considering proficiency levels of the participants, all of them have passed Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT), which has taken place earlier in the same year. According to the results of OOPT, participants were place in different levels of learning the English language. The score in OOPT is used as a benchmark for placing students in the institution's levels and for measuring their language proficiency. This test is held once a year and its results can be compared to other tests' results such as TOEFL and IELTS. Moreover, this displacement test does not only measure the students' knowledge in English grammar rules but also examines their ability to

comprehend and communicate well using English language through an online test designed according to (CEFR) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Research Instrument

The current study applies both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the connections between LLS and English proficiency among Saudi university students. LLS preferences and English proficiency of Saudi students were measured through the application of SILL, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, version 7.0 which is the ESL/EFL version of the test and is written in English. The SILL is a 50-item self-report survey designed to measure frequency and patterns of students' learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). The SILL consists of statements about strategies applies by EFL learners. They are required to respond to each item using a 5- point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("never or almost never true of me") to 5 ("Always or almost always true of me").

Oxford (1990) and Oxford & Burry- Stock (1995) claimed high validity of the SILL survey. Reliability for SILL is reported as 93-98, taking into consideration whether learners take the SILL in their native language. This reliability was established by using Cronbach's alpha mentioned in previous studies that were conducted in different countries of the world (Oxford, 1990; Ehrman &Oxford, 1990; Wharton, 2000).

Data Collection Procedures

Students of KAU, who joined the English language institution in their preparatory year, were asked to take the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) to test their language proficiency. This test has been developed by Oxford University press (OUP) to place students at the appropriate level in courses using the New Headway Plus special edition textbook series. The OOPT reliability has been validated and pretested

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by thousands of students. The results accurately reflect the students' English level. The OOPT has been correlated to CEFR, IELTS, TOEFL, and TOIEC levels.

This test, does not test grammar and vocabulary, it also tests how learners use knowledge in order to understand the meaning in communication. It has two sections: use of English and listening. The test gives both an overall score and individual scores for each section. Use of English section is approximately of 30 questions. These questions test vocabulary and grammar. The listening section is approximately of 15 questions. These questions test their understanding of the meanings in a conversation.

Furthermore, the second phase of this study is where the participants are given the SILL survey in order to see measure their language learning strategy preferences and how these choices can affect their English learning and proficiency. Participants were told that they were free to quit this additional test and survey at anytime without penalty. It has been explained well to them that research data and procedures were strictly confidential.

The students were also asked to give a short bio about themselves concerning gender, age, location, and previous educational experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 in order to point out results concerning frequencies and standard deviations. Furthermore, analysis of variances (ANOVA) was addressed in order to determine if there are significant variations concerning proficiency levels. T-test analysis was applied in order to point out any significant results concerning the relation between LLS and gender.

The SPSS correlation was used to provide answers for the first question: "what are the connections among the six categories of LLS, gender, and language proficiency"? Oxford (1990) developed a model, which included six groups of categories: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Oxford (1990) also developed an assessment

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survey SILL, which is considered the most comprehensive tool, used for identifying language learning strategy preferences (Foong &Goh, 1997). The following table (Table.1) shows an overall medium range of LLS use among Saudi learners (M=3.02, SD= .63). Obviously, metacognitive strategies were the most used strategy among the six ones, followed by social categories, compensation, affective, cognitive, and memory strategies.

Table.1. Statistics of SILL

Strategy Category	Cog	Meta	Soc	Mem	Aff	Comp	Overall
Mean	2.91	3.32	3.15	2.69	2.50	3.15	3.02
SD	.73	.79	.90	.69	.82	.72	.63

Interpretation of Data of SILL follows Oxford & Burry-Stock (1995) scales of low for the range between 1.0 and 2.4, medium for the range between 2.5 and 3.4, and high for the range between 3.5 and 5.0.

ANOVA was used (P<0.05) to show if there are significant variations and connections between LLS and language proficiency. This tool of analysis provides answers for the second question of this study concerning LLS and language proficiency. ANOVA results demonstrate that language proficiency had no significant effect neither on the overall use of language strategies nor on the six strategies of learning a language. The following table (Table.2) summarizes the overall results of the LLS in relation to language proficiency.

Strategy Category	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Cognitive	.155	2	.077	.145	.865
Metacognitive	.549	2	.275	.438	.646
Social	.416	2	.208	.255	.775
Memory	1.58	2	.791	1.675	.190
Affective	.794	2	.397	.582	.560

| Compensatory | .926 | 2 | .463 | .853 | .428 |
| Overall | .312 | 2 | .156 | .404 | .668 |

Furthermore, the following discussion will provide answers for the third and the fourth questions of the current research, concerning which strategy was mostly preferred by Saudi learners together with the effect of such preferences on the gender variable. Findings of the study shows that Saudi learners (males/females) preferred to use metacognitive strategies most of the time while memory strategies were the least preferred strategies used by the participants. Results also indicate a medium range of strategy use (males: M=3.06, SD=55 and females: M=3.00, SD=67). This shows there is no significant difference between the mean score of male and female learners concerning LLS preferences. Hence, gender variable has no effect on the overall results of LLS use. The following table (Table.3) explains the above-mentioned findings and reveals the mean scores of the six categories in relation to the variable of gender.

Strategy Category	Male (n=40) Mean	SD	Rank	Female (n=48) Mean	SD	Rank
Cognitive	2.98	.64	4	2.88	.76	5
Metacognitive	3.34	.71	1	3.31	.83	1
Social	3.25	.92	2	3.24	.90	2
Memory	2.78	.63	6	2.64	.71	6
Affective	2.94	.71	5	2.97	.87	4
Compensation	3.18	.67	3	3.14	.77	3
Overall	3.06	.55		3.00	.67	

Moreover, T-tests were used in order to examine the differences in the use of LLS between male and female students. The following table (Table.4) demonstrates that

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there are no significant differences between male and female students concerning the use of LLS.

Strategy Category	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Cognitive	.96	131	.34
Metacognitive	.28	129	.78
Social	.10	110	.92
Memory	1.26	125	.21
Affective	-.30	136	.77
Compensatory	.31	128	.76
Overall	.647	135	.52

To sum up, the results of the current study tend to be consistent with the results of some of the previous studies done among Arab EFL learners (Abu Shmais, 2003; McMullen, 2009; Yang, 2010). These studies and the current one indicated that learners tend to be medium strategy users in regard to the overall strategy use. Oxford (1990) explains that a medium range of strategy use means that the strategies are occasionally and now and then used. This explanation reveals that learners' preferences will not help them to become successful strategy users in learning a foreign language.

Data Findings

Findings from SILL show that learners used LLS at a medium to high level. As table.1 shows that the mean scores for the most used strategy (metacognitive) falls in the range of 3.32. This range according to Oxford's (1990) classification, demonstrates high strategy use. The mean score of the memory strategy, on the other hand, falls in the range of 2.69, which is considered the least strategy to be used among the rest. The total LLS score of the six strategies was 3.02, which demonstrates medium to high strategy use overall (Oxford, 1990). These findings

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(Table.1) are consistent with some studies focusing on LLS preferences (Gerami & Baighlou, 2011; Riazi, 2007). Strategies such as metacognitive ones help learners to understand the foreign language through practicing, summarizing and analyzing (Oxford, 1990). Saudi university students appear to focus and control their learning of a new language through using metacognitive strategies. Such strategies are frequently used to encourage students to overcome difficulties in understanding and practicing some grammatical rules, confusing writing styles, and "non-traditional instructional approaches" (Oxford, 1990, p.136).

Moreover, social strategies came second (M=3.24, SD=.90). This finding is consistent with research findings of other Arab learners (Khalil, 2005; Radwan, 2011). Such strategy encourages learners to communicate and interact with others to maximize learning (Oxford, 1990). Further, compensation strategies came third (M=3.15, SD=.74). This finding is consistent with some studies' findings focusing on Arab learners (Riazi, 2007), but inconsistent with findings of some studies (McMullen, 2009: Abu Shmais, 2003). Learners make use of such strategies to overcome any limitations in their linguistic competence (Oxford, 1990).

Cognitive strategies came fifth (M=2.91, SD= .73). This finding is inconsistent with some research findings concerning Arab learners (McMullen, 2009; Khalil, 2005; Radwan, 2011). These strategies seem to help learners to use their mental abilities such as repeating sounds, words, and practicing writing styles, etc. As for the memory strategies, they came last and were considered the least preferred strategies (Mean=2.69, SD= .69). This finding is consistent with the findings of (Al-Shaboul, Assassfeh, & Al-Shaboul, 2010, Radwan, 2011), but is inconsistent with some research findings (McMullen, 2009, Khalil, 2005). Such strategies help learners remember, store, and retrieve new information (oxford, 1990).

Generally, the results indicate that there was no significant relation between LLS and the language proficiency level of the learners. One explanation might be that the OOPT is considered as a university prerequisite for joining the language institution of

the university, and then starting taking academic courses in their majors. Another explanation might be related to curriculum design and instructional processes.

Furthermore, findings of the current study indicate also that there was no significant relation between LLS preferences and the independent variable of gender. In other words, male and female students tend to make use of the same language learning strategies. These results might be due to the fact that learners are fully aware of the importance of learning English as a foreign language. Both male and female Saudi learners made use of metacognitive strategies most frequently while memory strategies were the least used ones by both gender.

Conclusion & Recommendations for Future Studies

The current study aims at examining students' choices in the strategies they use in learning a foreign language. It also aims at identifying the most and the least used strategies by the subjects of the study and, hence, showing the relationship between the uses of LLS and language proficiency. Findings show that Saudi learners were overall medium strategy users. Metacognitive strategies were used most frequently while memory strategies were the least to be used by participants of this study. As it has been mentioned earlier, results of the current study demonstrate that there is no significant relationship between LLS and learners' proficiency level or their gender. Therefore, further future research is needed to examine language learning strategies and proficiency among Saudi learners of English in other various educational settings.

Moreover, this study measured learning strategy preferences using only one instrument, which is SILL. Thus, it is recommended that future research will apply a variety of instruments to measure such relationship such as interviews, direct observations, dialogue journals, etc. Further, the current study applies only one tool to measure learners' proficiency, which is the OOP Test. It is recommended future research will use various tools of measurement of English proficiency, including assessments that require communication and writing tasks. Finally, results of this study indicate that there is no significant relationship between the use of LLS and

gender. Hence, it is recommended that future research will examine this kind of relation and focus on gender as a dependent variable.

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