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JORDANIAN STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH: STRATEGY DEPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

Gender and language proficiency are among the key factors that may impact learning strategy use. Thus, this study explored the impact of gender, perceived language proficiency, and academic level on learning strategy use by 111 English-major EFL students whose native language is Arabic. Using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), the study revealed that females opt to use strategies more frequently than do males. The results also showed that the higher the proficiency level of the students was, the more frequent strategy use was. The most prevalent among the different strategy types was metacognitive ones when the least was memory. These findings are discussed and implications are set accordingly.

Keywords: Language learning strategy, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Perceived English proficiency

INTRODUCTION

Research admits that learners do not necessarily handle the learning process in much the same way. The strategies used in language learning, thus, may differ from one learner to another quantitatively and qualitatively. Whereas they share same target, learning English in our context, EFL learners may consciously or unconsciously favor some strategy categories over others. This variability in students' preferences may extend well to strategies within the same category. Thus, for example, learners in a given context may favor metacognitive strategies (as a category) over memory or social strategies, for

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instance. This would not necessarily mean equal preference to all individual strategies within any of the aforementioned categories. Such variability and the factors perpetuating it have been the concern of many researchers with an attempt to identify commonly used strategies and the least frequently used ones as a basis towards the ultimate goal of improving students' language learning. Especially through adopting Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL), the road has been paved for conducting research projects with comparable results.

To begin with, a group of researchers (e.g., Gass & Selinker, 2001; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; and Rubin & Thompson, 1994) have linked language learning strategies to such variables as age, gender, aptitude, attitude, motivation, anxiety, individual learning style(s), learning strategies, personality, and language background. Different researchers have looked at language learning strategies through different lenses. For example, Rubin (1987) has defined language learning strategies as strategies that contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and, in turn, affect learning directly. In much the same way, Ehrman & Oxford (1989) viewed learning strategies as steps taken to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. Furthermore, O'Mally and Chamot (1990) looked at language learning strategies as the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information.

This interest in language learning strategies has amounted to an abundant research investigating individual language learning strategies (LLS) and its impact on learning a second/foreign language (Bremner, 1998; Green, & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1990; Park, 1997; Politzer, 1983; Sheorey, 1999; Wharton, 2000) to name some. The consensus in literature is that all learners, no matter the success they achieve, do employ a variety of learning strategies. Oxford (1990) depicts the strategies that different learners may lean on when learning a new language. According to her, learners may depend on memorization, making sentences, guessing, and/or using a dictionary. According to Hishmanoglu (2000), learners, consciously or otherwise, may use different language strategies while processing information.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Building on the findings of the aforementioned research, researchers' concern has been manifest in addressing the learning strategies used in learning a new language linking them to the success learners achieve in learning a new language (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Wenden, 1987b).

Recent research has focused on determining whether there are connections between strategy use and language proficiency (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2003; Wharton, 2000). These studies showed that proficient language learners employed more strategies in

language learning than less proficient language learners. For instance, Green and Oxford (1995) investigated the use of learning strategies by Puerto Rican university students and reported that successful language learners engaged in more frequent and higher level of strategy use than less successful learners. Similarly, Park (1997) examined the relationship between language learning strategy use of Korean students and their English proficiency as measured by TOEFL. Park's findings suggest a positive linear relationship between strategy use and proficiency level; the higher the TOEFL scores were, the more strategies used. In the same vein, Wharton's (2000) examination of the relationship between the strategy use of college bilingual students in Singapore and their measured language proficiency revealed that the higher use of strategy was associated with a higher proficiency level. Bremner's (1999) investigation of Hong Kong learners' use revealed that students favored compensation and metacognitive strategies whereas the least frequently used were affective and memory strategies. Additionally, proficiency significantly varied relative to only eleven out of the entire fifty strategies among which nine were cognitive, and one of each compensation and social categories. In a nutshell, these studies clearly demonstrate a positive relationship between language proficiency and strategy use.

At another front, studies (e.g., Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Wharton, 2000) investigating the relationship between strategy use and learner's perceived proficiency seem to suggest a significant positive relationship between students' perceptions and strategy use indicating that the higher the self-rating proficiency was, the more frequently the strategy was used.

Other factors that may influence learners' choice or use of learning strategies, such as age, gender, culture, aptitude, motivation, or learning styles have also been investigated. For example, reported research results show that females as more frequent users of strategies (Ehrman, & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1993). Females demonstrated higher frequency use of social learning strategies (Politzer, 1983; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989), higher frequency use of formal rule-based (e.g., generating and revising rules, analyzing words), and conversational input strategies (e.g., asking for pronunciation correction) (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). However, as a contradictory finding, another study at Singapore examining the strategy use of bilingual students reported that males used more strategies frequently than females (Wharton, 2000). Wharton explained that previous language learning experience (e.g., bilingual education) may be a more influential factor than gender on certain types of learning strategy use.

The focus of some other research projects (e.g., Bedell & Oxford, 1996; Grainger, 1997; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Politzer, 1983; Reid, 1987; Wharton, 2000) was on the relationship between strategy use and the cultural background with findings indicating that learners from different cultural backgrounds may vary in their strategy preferences. Thus for example, whereas Asians preferred memorization strategies Hispanics favored social

strategies (Politzer, 1983). However, contradicting findings were revealed by Wharton (2000) reporting that bilingual Asians learning English as a third language preferred social strategies compared to other strategy types.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Despite the abundance of plethora of studies addressing strategies used by students enrolled in ESL/EFL programs in high school and/or adult learners involved in non-academic Intensive English Programs (IEP) classes, there is little in the extant literature which focuses specifically on the language learning strategies of university students majoring in English Language. In response, this study came to fill this void through investigating the overall language learning strategy use of English Language learners at the university level. This research examines the relationship between language learning strategy use, on the one hand, and gender, perceived foreign language proficiency, and academic level guided by the following research questions:

1. What language learning strategies are most/ least frequently used by English-major EFL undergraduates at Hashemite University?
2. Is there any statistically significant variability in students' deployment of learning strategy attributed to gender?
3. Is there any correlation between students' deployment of learning strategies and their perceived linguistic proficiency?
4. Is there any statistically significant variability in students' deployment of learning strategy attributed to academic level?

METHODS

a) Participants

The study sample was selected based on a voluntary basis from three course sessions. It consisted of a total of 111 English-major students (17 freshmen, 27 sophomores, 31 juniors, and 36 seniors), with 47 males and 64 females (Table 1). The participants represented the three linguistic proficiency levels of beginner (13), intermediate (82), and advanced (16). The participants ranged between 18 and 24 years old with the majority having nine years of formal English language learning.

b) Instrument

A two-part survey was used in this study: the first aimed at collecting demographic data about study participants, while the second, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), designed by Oxford (1990), aimed

Table 1 Sample distribution by gender, proficiency level, and academic level

		n	Percent
Gender	Male	47	42.3
	Female	64	57.7
Proficiency Level	Beginner	13	11.7
	Intermediate	82	73.9
	Advanced	16	14.4
Academic level	Freshman	17	15.3
	Sophomore	27	24.3
	Junior	31	27.9
	Senior	36	32.4

at collecting data about language learning strategy use. The SILL has been used in many studies with a reported reliability ranging between .85 and .98. And since SILL has two versions (native English speakers learning a foreign language (version 5.1, 80 items) and speakers of other language learning English (version 7.0, 50 items)), this study used the second version of the questionnaire. The SILL follows a five-point Likert scale (1=almost never true, 2=generally not true, 3=somewhat true, 4=generally true, and 5=always almost true). To ensure the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach alpha was calculated in this study yielding .81, which means the instrument is reliable enough.

In order to avoid any possible misunderstanding of any survey item, the SALLI was used in its equivalent Arabic version. Towards this end, the researchers in this study translated the questionnaire into Arabic. The Arabic translation was then translated back into English by two independent faculty members at the English Department at the University. The back-translated version was found closely matching the original one. This process of back translation has been recommended to increase the validity of the test when given in another language (Brislen, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973).

c) Data collection and analysis

The researchers administered the survey first-hand. Participants were presented with the Individual Background Questionnaire (IBQ) followed by the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) in the same session. Participants were clearly reminded to read each item carefully and respond according to their actual language learning strategy use. The questionnaires were distributed, responded to, and collected during session time.

Upon collecting these questionnaires, data was fed into--and analyzed using--the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Package).

Both descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and referential statistics were used for analysis.

RESULTS

a) Holistic Deployment of strategies

This section presents the results of the study according to the order of the aforementioned research questions. To begin with, the mean value for students' use of the entire learning strategies was 3.35, with a standard deviation of .48. Broadly speaking, referred to Oxford's categorization (i. e, high usage (3.5-5) this means that the students can be described as "high" medium or "low" high learning strategy users.

The most frequently used strategies were the metacoginitive (*M*= 3.86), followed by cognitive (*M*= 3.44), social (*M*= 3.37), affective (*M*= 3.19), compensation (*M*= 3.17), whereas the least were memory strategies (*M*= 3.11).

b) Individual strategy use

At the level of individual strategies, as shown in Table 2, the students were high users of 19 items (38%), medium users of 29 strategies (58%), and low users of only two strategies. In fact, students preferred neither to write down their feelings in a language learning diary (affective) nor to use flashcards to remember new English words (memory).

Interestingly enough, the top ranking strategies in terms of use frequency were metacognitive; students consistently look for ways how to be better learners of English (*M*= .4.41), think about progress in learning English (*M*=4.27), pay attention when someone is speaking English (*M*=4.23), and notice their own English mistakes and use that information to help them do better (*M*=4.06).

Table 2 Ascending mean value and standard deviation for individual learning strategies

Strategy	Mean	Std. Dev.
High Use Strategies		
I try to find ways how to be better a learner of English	4.41	.868
I think about my progress in learning English.	4.27	.981
I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	4.23	.914
I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	4.06	.927
I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	3.96	.883

I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	3.95	1.082
I try to talk like native English speakers.	3.95	1.115
I watch English language television shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	3.95	1.168
I practice the sounds of English.	3.81	1.040
If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	3.79	1.054
If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	3.68	1.153
I think of the relationship between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	3.65	.997
I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	3.62	1.176
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	3.62	1.229
I say or write new English words several times.	3.62	1.133
I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	3.55	.988
I encourage myself to speak English even when I feel afraid of making a mistake	3.54	1.242
I look for people I can talk to in English.	3.53	1.299
I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	3.50	1.175
Medium-Use Strategies		
I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	3.49	1.197
I use the English words I know in different ways.	3.46	.961
I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	3.45	1.118
I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	3.45	1.241
I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English.	3.43	1.305
I review English lessons often.	3.43	.997
I read magazines, books, newspapers, and textbooks written in English.	3.41	1.209
I remember new English words or phrase by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	3.39	1.230
I ask for help from English speakers.	3.36	1.249
I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	3.36	1.219
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	3.36	1.271

I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	3.33	1.246
I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	3.32	1.169
When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	3.30	2.122
I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	3.29	1.209
I ask questions in English to other students or native speakers of English.	3.28	1.259
I try to find patterns (grammar) in English.	3.26	1.226
I talk to someone else about how I feel about learning English.	3.25	1.424
I look for words in my own language (Korean or Chinese) that are similar to new words in English.	3.23	1.234
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	3.20	1.361
I practice English with other students or native speakers of English.	3.10	1.307
I start conversations in English.	2.96	1.183
I use rhymes to remember new English words (e.g., know-no, nail-snail, cat-bat).	2.95	1.384
I try not to translate word-for-word.	2.94	2.337
I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	2.90	1.265
I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	2.81	1.372
I read English without looking up every new word.	2.72	1.363
I physically act out new English words.	2.41	1.164
I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	2.41	1.417
Low Use Strategies		
I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	2.15	1.237
I use flashcards to remember new English words.	1.77	.972

c) Strategy use by gender

To see the impact of gender differences on students' use of the learning strategies, *t* test was run twice: first with the six strategy types and then with individual items. The results (Table 3) show that the mean difference was significant only when it comes to affective strategies (t= -2.022, p= .04) with a higher use frequency by females (M=3.24, s. d. = .69) compared to males

(*M*= 2.95, s. d. = .69). That is, students' gender differences had impact on their use of only one type of learning strategies, the affective.

Table 3 t test for the impact of gender on strategy use

		Levene's		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Conf. Interval	
	Equal Variance	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tail	Mean Diffe-rence	Std. Error Diff	Lower	Upper
Social	Assumed	.99	.32	-.490	109	.625	-.068	.134	-.34	.20637
	Not assumed			-.498	104.7	.619	-.068	.14	-.34	.20183
Compen-sation	Assumed	.00	.997	-.876	109	.383	-.133	.15	-.44	.16831
	Not assumed			-.865	94	.389	-.133	.15	-.44	.17299
Meta-cognitive	Assumed	.05	.825	-1.526	109	.130	-.190	.13	-.44	.05692
	Not assumed			-1.513	96	.134	-.190	.13	-.44	.05940
Memory	Assumed	1.32	.254	-.783	109	.435	-.086	.11	-.30	.13186
	Not assumed			-.807	107.5	.422	-.086	.11	-.30	.12551
Cognitive	Assumed	2.49	.117	-1.83	109	.070	-.217	.12	-.45	.01779
	Not assumed			-1.90	108.3	.061	-.217	.11	-.44	.00978
Affective	Assumed	2.79	.098	-1.96	109	.053	-.300	.15	-.60	.00397
	Not assumed			-2.02	108	.046	-.300	.15	-.60	-.00583

And though the difference was statistically significant pertinent only to affective strategies, the fact is that--as can be seen in Table 4--the mean response of the females was consistently higher, which means female students consistently reported higher strategy use frequency.

Additionally, to explore the impact of gender on students' deployment of individual learning strategies, independent t test was used. Only four survey items yielded significant differences; three were cognitive and the fourth was affective. In two of the three cognitive strategies ("I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand" (*t*= -3.492, *P*=.001) and "I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English" (*t*=-

2.596, *P*=.01), females (*M*= 3.64, 3.16, respectively) registered higher strategy use frequency than males (*M*= 2.89, 2.55 respectively). The third

Table 4 Mean values and standard deviation for Students' use of the six strategy types

Strategy Type	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social	Male	3.3333	.67298
	Female	3.4010	.75226
Compensation	Male	3.0957	.83242
	Female	3.2292	.76203
Metacognitive	Male	3.7470	.67016
	Female	3.9375	.63440
Memory	Male	3.0615	.50696
	Female	3.1476	.61596
Cognitive	Male	3.3191	.53241
	Female	3.5357	.66976
Affective	Male	2.9468	.69166
	Female	3.2448	.85962

cognitive strategy, "I watch English language television shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English" (*t*= 2.03, *P*= .04), received significantly higher reported use frequency by males (*M*=4.21) than females (*M*= 3.76). The only affective strategy yielding significant differences was "I encourage myself to speak English even when I feel afraid of making a mistake (*t*= -2.60, *P*= .01) whereby females (*M*=3.80) reported higher frequency use than males (*M*= 3.19).

d) Strategy use by proficiency level

To explore the impact of students' perceived linguistic proficiency level (low, intermediate, advanced) on strategy use, ANOVA was used twice; first with the six strategy types and second with individual strategies. And when there were significant differences, Scheffe was used for multiple comparisons. ANOVA was used

The results, presented in Table 5, showed that there were statistically significant differences in students' deployment of all strategy types except compensation. And even though compensation did not yield significant differences (alpha=.05), advanced proficiency students (*M*= 3.31) used this

strategy type relatively more frequently than intermediate and beginners who had almost the same mean (*M*= 3.15).

Table 5 ANOVA for proficiency level and the six major strategies

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Social	Between Groups	6.530	2	3.265	7.041	.001
	Within Groups	50.079	108	.464		
	Total	56.609	110			
Communicative	Between Groups	.366	2	.183	.288	.750
	Within Groups	68.575	108	.635		
	Total	68.940	110			
Memory	Between Groups	1.994	2	.997	3.173	.046
	Within Groups	33.932	108	.314		
	Total	35.926	110			
Cognitive	Between Groups	5.144	2	2.572	7.422	.001
	Within Groups	37.426	108	.347		
	Total	42.570	110			
Affective	Between Groups	6.469	2	3.234	5.416	.006
	Within Groups	64.497	108	.597		
	Total	70.966	110			
Metacognitive	Between Groups	5.038	2	2.519	6.484	.002
	Within Groups	41.959	108	.389		
	Total	46.997	110			

Significant differences were revealed in using social (*F* 7.041, *p*= .001), memory (*F*. 3.173, *p*=.046), cognitive (*F* 7.422, *p*= .001), affective (*F* 5.416, *p*=.006), and metacognitive strategies (*F* 6.484, *p*= .002). Follow-up the source of difference revealed that advanced proficiency level students consistently reported higher use frequency of the five aforementioned strategy types. The mean of advanced students was significantly higher than both beginner and intermediate groups with reference to:

a. social learning strategies (advanced *M*= 3.90, 3.00, 3.33 , respectively)
b. cognitive strategies (advanced *M*= 3.93, 3.14, 3.39)
c. metacognitive strategies (advanced *M*= 4.33, 3.54, 3.81)

Advanced students also reported higher frequency use than did intermediate students on memory (*M*= 3.44, 3.05, respectively and affective strategies (*M*= 3.64, 2.98, respectively). In a nutshell, advanced students registered higher use on all strategy types while intersecting with beginners and intermediate on three of them (social, cognitive, and metacognitive).

When ANOVA was run to see the impact of proficiency differences on students' reported use of individual strategies, the results indicated that students from different proficiency levels differed significantly in their frequency use of 15 strategies. Most often than not, the differences were consistently significant between advanced and beginner-proficiency levels. Almost half of these strategies fall under psychological or cognitive factors i.e., they are strongly related to how students tackled language learning, rather than with what students actually do (e.g., use, read, write, etc.). Thus, for example, advanced students reported significantly *higher* strategy use frequency than beginners with reference to the following:

"I encourage myself to speak English even when I feel afraid of making a mistake" (*F* 5.80, *P*=.004, *M*= 4.38, 2.92, respectively).
"I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English." (*F* 4.13, *P*=.019, *M*= 3.94, 2.69, respectively).
"I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them. (*F* 3.86, *P*=.024, *M*= 4.00, 3.00, respectively).
"I read magazines, books, newspapers, and textbooks written in English (*F* 6.913, *P*= .001, *M*= 4.25, 2.69, respectively)
" I ask questions in English to other students or native speakers of English (*F* 7.246, *P*=.001, *M*= 4.19 2.50, respectively)
"I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English. (*F* 6.89, *P*=.002, *M*= 4.38, 2.92, respectively).
" I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English (*F* 5.33, *P*= .006, *M*= 4.38 , 3.15, respectively)
"I use the English words I know in different ways (*F* 3.48, *P*= .034, *M*= 4.00, 3.00, respectively)

In the following three items, advanced students reported higher use frequency than intermediate:

I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English (*F* 3.88, *P*=.02, *M*= 4.38, 3.52, respectively)
" I pay attention when someone is speaking English" (*F* 3.97, *P*= .022, *M*= 4.81, 4.15, respectively)
" I start conversations in English (*F* 7.30, *P*= .001, *M*= 3.94, 2.77, respectively)

The reported use frequency of both advanced and intermediate students was significantly higher than beginners' on the following two strategies: (a) "I try to find patterns (grammar) in English" (*M*= 3.81, 3.32, and 2.23, respectively), and (b) "I practice English with other students or native speakers of English" (*M*= 4.25, 3.02, and 2.15, respectively).

Intermediate students reported the highest significant frequency use (*M*= 3.40) on only one strategy, namely "I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand (*F*= 3.62, *P*=.030) compared to beginners (*M*= 2.54, S.D.=1.26). On the other hand, pertinent to only one strategy, "I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English," beginners reported significantly higher strategy-use frequency (*M*= 4.38) than intermediate students (*M*= 3.11).

e) Strategy use by academic level

Exploring the impact of students' academic level on strategy use was carried out using ANOVA first with the major six strategy categories and then with individual items. ANOVA results on the six strategy types indicated no statistically significant differences. In order to examine the impact of students' variability in academic level on individual strategy use, One-Way ANOVA was used. The results showed that there were statistically significant differences among the four student groups pertinent to only two of the survey items. The first was "I watch English language television shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English". (*F*=3.39, *P*=.02). The source of difference, using Scheffe, was between the use frequency of freshmen (*M*= 3.38) and sophomores (*M*= 4.41). This means that sophomores use this strategy more frequently than do freshmen. The second was "I encourage myself to speak English even when I feel afraid of making a mistake" (*F*= 2.76, *P*= .04). The source of difference, using Scheffe, was between the use frequency of juniors (*M*= 3.74) and sophomores (*M*= 2.96). This means that juniors use this strategy more frequently than do sophomores.

To shed light on the distribution of strategy use by academic level, descriptive statistics was used. The mean of students' overall use of all strategy clusters was in favor of sophomores (*M*= 3.359), followed by seniors (*M*= 3.355), juniors (*M*= 3.341), and finally freshmen (3.316). Additionally, sophomores surpassed other groups on three strategy

types; namely metacognitive (*M*= 3.930), social (*M*= 3.5247), and compensation (*M*= 3.3580). Noticeably, there was no consistency among other student groups on the other strategy clusters. Sophomores, it seems the general pattern, use strategies more frequently than other student groups.

DISCUSSION

a) Holistic strategy use

Based on the results obtained in this study, students can be categorized as "low" high users of the learning strategies. That is to say, they are strategic learners. The most favored to them were metacognitive strategies, which indicates that their learning practices reflect their conscious awareness of the necessity to better their learning habits. They have clear goals, monitor their progress, and consistently search for better ways to enhance their English skills through attempting to communicate with speakers of English, peers, or visitors whenever possible. They are also consciously involved in self-evaluation and self-correction in light of monitoring their performance. Additionally, students make an effort in exposing themselves to the target language in its oral mode through watching television English shows and movies as well as in its written modes through reading English books and magazines.

And though one might expect students to favor memory strategies, the fact is that a look at the type of strategies categorized under this label indicates that some of these can hardly be of preference to university students. Thus for example, using flash cards and physically acting the meanings of new words are likely to occur with younger language learners. In this study, using flashcards, for example, ranked last among the fifty strategies with a mean of only 1.77. In support to this argument, it should be noticed that students' thinking of the relationships between what they already know and what they currently learn had a relatively higher mean (3.65), though considered a memory strategy, ranked 12th among the fifty strategies. This means that grouping the strategies under this umbrella might, to some extent, disguise, and give faulty assumptions about, some differences between different strategies within the same category. In fact, this is what has invited the researchers in this study to view these strategies not only collectively but also individually within the same strategy category. In support to this line of reasoning, it should also be noted that though I use flashcards to remember new English words.

Another interpretation for the low frequency use of memory strategies is the possibility that due to the recent trend in the Jordanian educational system toward integrating technology into instruction and departing away from

traditional teaching methods students no longer favor or adopt strategies associated with rote-learning and mere memorization divorced of linking what they learn to authentic communicative needs and functions.

Whereas it sounds critical that EFL learners lean on compensation strategies to overcome the linguistic deficiencies they have in communication, compensation strategies ranked second below. This indicates little eagerness on students' behalf to look up every new word and and/or make up new words if they do not know the right ones in English. It is the researchers' belief in this study that compensation strategies can hardly be viewed in absence of authentic use of English in real-life communication. Since they are EFL learners, the students might lack the need to use English as a medium of communication in their interaction beyond the limits of the classroom. As articulated by Rabab'ah (2002):

> The students in Jordan, for example, learn English in their home country where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English in Jordan is through formal instruction, i.e. in the classroom where language teachers are native speakers of Arabic. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language which is only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists (p.181)

Compared to the findings of other researchers (e.g., Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006), where compensation ranked third, our findings are somewhat conflicting; that is, one needs to go deeper and look at the strategies on an individual basis. So saying, the researchers have found that although the participants reported "making up new words" with a mean of 2.41 and "reading English without looking up every new word" with a mean of 2.72, as the lowest, they reported using "guessing" with the mean of 3.30 and "gestures" with the mean of 3.45 on the upper intermediate skills. Briefly, then, whereas clustered compensation strategies ranked relatively low, some strategies falling within this category scored relatively high.

Students' use of social strategies compared to other strategy types can be described as moderate. A look at the category of social strategies indicates that such strategies are more likely to be used in a context wherein learners have the opportunity to interact with native speakers to practice the language, seek correction, and ask for help. Favoring a given strategy, this means, does not necessarily coincide with actually using it. In a context like ours, students' enthusiasm to interact with native speakers is rarely fulfilled, especially given the fact that none of the professors in the department is a native English speaker. A witness to the departments' awareness of this fact is an initiative taken recently in the department to allocate an only English day a week.

In reference to what Rabab'ah (2002) stated, it would be more beneficial to our students if the English departments all over the country secure exposure

to native English speaker through the exchange programs at both levels the faculty as well as the students.

b) Gender

Pertinent to gender, our findings showed that though the only significant difference between males and females was associated with affective strategies, females consistently surpassed males in strategy use. As a matter of fact, previous theory and research seem to arrive at consensus in this regard. This "fits in with previous theory and research about females as better, more efficient learners and users of language (native or other) than males" (Oxford, 1996, p. 37). Despite the validity of this argument, the findings of a few researchers (e.g., Watanabe, 1990, cf. Oxford, 1996) revealed that only when it comes to particular individual strategies, males can be higher strategy users while Vandergrift (1997) reported no differences in strategy use associated with gender differences.

In addition to what Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) stated in explaining their similar finding that "Women tend to build social relationships and use social networks with greater consistency than men," our context, we assume, is unique. In our department where the male-female ratio is 1:5, one possible factor behind the high preference of affective strategies by females than males could be the fact that females constitute the majority of our students. Their opportunities, hence, are wider for expressing their feelings about learning the language and making mistakes without being frown upon by peers.

c) Proficiency level

Except in a few instances, there was as association between proficiency level and strategy use. When there were significant differences these differences were always in favor of advance proficiency level learners. Not only this, but also when intermediate level students differed significantly in their reported strategy use frequency, the difference was with beginners' use frequency. And even though there was no significant difference relevant to compensation strategies, advanced level students reported relatively higher use compared to any of the other two groups, followed by intermediate, and then beginner students. Given that the findings of many researchers (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2003; Wharton, 2000) demonstrate a positive linear relationship between the two variables under question, one would expect advanced students to significantly surpass the other groups in using compensation strategies.

What could stand behind the comparability of different student-group responses is possibly that relative to other strategy types that can be used when dealing with the written mode of the language, compensation strategies are the ones that are most badly needed in verbal communication, which our

students lack. In other words, regardless of their proficiency level, what our three student groups share is the low amount of exposure to English. Still, this does not demise advanced students' use of such strategies compared to other groups as witnessed by their relative higher use.

The strategies viewed individually across the three proficiency level groups, 15 yielded significant differences. The majority of these (11 with a ratio of 73%) were in favor of advanced students. Carefully considered, these strategies shape an answer to the question," What are the most effective and widely used strategies from the view point of distinguished students in an EFL context?" That is, successful, or excellent English learners if you want, are those who not only encourage themselves to speak English regardless of the mistakes they may make or plan their schedule to allocate enough time to study English, but are also constantly in urge to improving their language through using English with any conceivable source of English input. They also look for opportunities to widen the scope of their literacy environment in order to practice English via reading magazines, books, newspapers, and textbooks as much as possible. Their literacy practices extend to writing notes, messages, letters or reports to enrich their vocabulary reservoir. Considering the *how*, successful learners not only reflect on their learning but also come up with conscious conclusions that help them self-regulate their learning process; hence, lowering their anxiety level. Briefly, when considering strategy use frequency, it does matter what proficiency level students have.

d) Academic level

As for the impact of academic level on strategy use, the results showed no significant differences at the level of clustered strategies. However, difference was shown when considering individual strategies. This difference, still, was pertinent to only two strategies, and the general line of preference was towards students with a longer period of formal learning experience. In fact, this finding is beyond the scope of what the researchers hypothesized. Whereas the researchers hypothesized the academic level might count pertinent to students' use of learning strategies, the results showed otherwise. This stated, the researchers recommend carrying out further investigations to explore the potential impacts this variable might have on learning strategy use.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Learners, no matter their success, employ a variety of learning strategies; different learners employ different learning strategies. Students' preferences of which strategies to intentionally or unintentionally use or avoid are not

divorced of some factors that include their gender and perceived proficiency level.

This study investigated the impact of gender, proficiency level, and academic level on undergraduate EFL learners' overall learning strategy use. Our findings support the line of research suggesting that females use learning strategies more frequently than males. Especially since it is not clear whether male students avoid some strategies intentionally or not, one implication based on this finding opens the door wide for considering the possibility of enhancing their awareness of the importance of such strategies. Therefore, the message to send to instructors, if they are quite determined to be effective, is to explicitly instruct students in certain strategies based on the outcomes of need assessment: students' needs steer instruction.

To students, on the other hand, this finding invites them to reflect on their learning habits and practices in order to guarantee a wise exploitation of the wide array of learning strategies they have at their disposal. While doing so, both instructors and students should be reminded of the impediment posed by the EFL context in which they interact. The reoccurring dilemma EFL students seem to struggle with is the limited potential of their EFL context to not only invite but--sometimes—force them to use the language. This is in accordance with what Oxford (1996, p.36) states, "a *second* language environment, which demands daily use of the target language, often calls for (or encourages) more frequent strategy use than a *foreign* language environment, which does not require continual use of the target language. This is a sound generalization for most language students." And it does apply fully to the context of our study.

At another front, our study findings indicate that strategy use frequency characterizes more, as opposed to less, high perceived-proficiency level. This given, the researchers recommend that instructors should scaffold learners, especially beginners, and take them from their comfort zone to a more challenging one through direct instruction and modeling. This, at a following step, necessitates a gradual release of responsibility to students manifest in more hands-on tasks that extend to student more chances to practice. In light of their students' proficiency level, this would entail that teachers be aware of the different roles they are supposed to play in their classrooms; moving on the continuum from direct instruction to monitoring. In brief, since strategic learners are made, rather than born, students need to be immersed in authentic interactive situations that call for strategy use, which is unattainable in absence of a teacher who is willing to share the stage in his/her classroom with students.

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