

A Study on Language Learning Strategy Use of Young Turkish Learners

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Abstract—In this study, language learning strategies (LLS) of 111 8th grade students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in three private primary schools in Edirne are initially investigated. The effect of gender and the achievement of students on the use of LLS are also examined. The data are collected through the Turkish version of SILL of Karahan (2007) adapted from Lan's (2005) Taiwanese Children's SILL and are analysed through SPSS (17.0). At the end of the study, the most commonly used LLS by the 8th grade students were investigated. Beside this, the ten most and the least frequently used LLS were also examined. Among these strategies metacognitive, social and affective strategies were found to be the most frequently used language learning strategies whereas memory and cognitive strategies are found to be rarely used ones. In the study, the effect of gender on the use of LLS was identified. Females were found to use LLS more widely than males. Yet, no significant difference was found on the use of LLS between successful and average students.

Index Terms—language learning, language learning strategies, language learning strategy use, gender, achievement of the students

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers and researchers have noticed that there is not any single research and method that would provide universal achievement in second language teaching. As Brown (2007) suggested, regardless of any teaching methods or techniques, successes of certain learners in language learning have been a source of inspiration for teachers as well as researchers. Such inspiration enabled them to facilitate invaluable research shedding light on language learning strategies. Such strategies were identified and described in many different ways by different researchers. Wenden and Rubin (1987) define language learning strategies as “any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information”. According to Oxford (1992/1993), language learning strategies are “specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills (p.18).

Language learning strategy research dates back to the 1970s. Most of the research focused primarily on the strategies used by successful language learners. Many studies that explored the strategy preferences of learners also investigated how proficiently the learners used these strategies. Rubin (1975), Bialystok (1981), Wenden (1987), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and many others researched on learning strategies. Among these, Bialystok (1981) conducted a study on high school students learning French in Toronto, Canada. The results showed that, the students employed four models of learning strategies: inferencing, monitoring, formal practising, and functional practising. Bialystok also found that these strategies promoted positive attitudes toward learning.

In a study among English learners in Puerto Rico, Green and Oxford (1995) reported that successful students employed strategies more frequently than less successful ones. Lan and Oxford (2003) conducted a study among 6th grade EFL learners in Taiwan. They found that high proficiency level students employed more strategies and more higher level strategies than poor students used. The successful language learners also employed strategies more frequently and efficiently.

Other researchers investigated the LLS of younger learners (see for example, Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Chesterfield & Chesterfield, 1985; Filmore, 1985 and Lan & Oxford, 2003). Bautier-Castaing (in Lan & Oxford, 2003) carried out a study on 60 Francophone children learning French syntax and 75 foreign children learning French as SL. This study found that both groups frequently used cognitive strategies such as analogy and error correction strategies such as simplifying structures.

Wong Filmore (1985) studied 50 bilingual English and Chinese ESL kindergarten students. The Chinese pupils were found to be reluctant to start conversation with the English speakers. They often wanted their native English speaking peers to start the conversation. This study clearly indicated that the learners who tended to interact with others and use their language skills during the interaction process become more successful in the language learning process.

Chamot and El-Dinary (1999) conducted a six year longitudinal study in the United States on 44 third and fourth grade students in French, Spanish and Japanese immersion programs. The learning strategies employed by successful

and unsuccessful young learners were examined. The researchers found that the students at every level tended to explain their thinking and learning process in detail once their metacognitive awareness emerged.

Lan (2005) conducted a study on 1191 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) elementary school students from major geographical areas of Taiwan in order to find out the relationship between their language learning strategies and factors affecting their strategy choices. The results indicated that two metacognitive strategies, namely “noting progress in learning English and analysing errors to avoid making the same errors again”, were the most frequently used strategies by Taiwanese students (Lan, 2005, p. 107). Besides metacognitive strategies, some compensation strategies such as “asking for help when a word is not known in English, social strategies such as asking people to slow down, repeat, or clarify what was said”, and affective strategies such as trying to relax when stressed by the idea of speaking English were found to be the most frequently preferred language learning strategies (Lan, 2005, p.108). He also identified the least frequently preferred language learning strategies by Taiwanese children. Only a few memory strategies such as “using flashcards to memorize new words and learning new words in sentences” were the least frequently preferred (Lan, 2005, p. 109)

A great deal of research has been conducted on language learning strategies and the common purpose of these studies including the present work is to identify how the use of LLS by students and teachers provide an efficient language teaching and learning process.

In this study, language learning strategies preferred by the 8th grade students (13 to14 years old) in primary schools in Edirne were investigated. The effects of gender and of language proficiency on the use of language learning strategies are also investigated.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The basic purpose of this study was to identify the LLS of the 8th grade students learning English as a foreign language. The study aimed at identifying the most and the least frequently used language learning strategies by the young learners, and the effects of gender and language level on strategy choice. The study was conducted on the 8th grade students of three private primary schools in Edirne, namely Beykent College, Edirne College and Serhat College to investigate the LLS of these students and sought answers to the following research questions: 1) What are the specific language learning strategies preferred by the 8th grade EFL students? 2) Is there a significant difference between language learning strategies used by male and female students? 3) Is there a significant difference between language learning strategies used by successful and average students?

B. Participants

The sample of the study was not an even distribution of female and male samples (51 females, 60 males). All 111 students were similar in socioeconomic status with the majority of them coming from similar social environments and cultural backgrounds.

C. Data Collection Instrument

In the present study, Lan’s (2005) Taiwanese Children’s SILL adapted to Turkish children by Karahan (2007) was used. The inventory adapted by Karahan consists of 31 items in 5 parts: In part A, there are seven items which aim to identify the memory strategies of the students; In part B, there are nine items to investigate the cognitive strategies of the students: In part C, there are four items to find out compensation strategies of the students: In part D, there are five items in order to detect the meta-cognitive strategies of the students: In part E, there are three items to find out the affective strategies of the students: In part F, there are three items to identify the social strategies of students The five-point Likert-scale responses are as follows:

1= Never or almost never 2= Usually not 3= Sometimes 4= Often 5= Always and almost always

D. Data Collection Process

Lan’s (2005) Taiwanese Children’s SILL adapted to Turkish children by Karahan (2007) was used as the data collection instrument. This inventory is a five point Likert scale consisting of 31 items in 5 parts. After permission was guaranteed by the Provincial Directorate of National Education of Edirne and by the schools, the Turkish version of Taiwanese Children’s SILL was circulated. Before conducting this inventory, the participants were informed about the inventory and the importance of their contributions for the success of the study. It was clearly explained to the students that this was not an examination; it was a study that needed carefully considered answers. Only one English lesson (40 minutes) was allocated for the students to answer 31 items of the Turkish SILL. A separate sitting was conducted for the absentees later.

III. FINDING AND RESULTS

To find the frequency of strategy use, the ordering key introduced by Oxford (1990) was used during the analysis of the SILL results with a scale ranging from 1 to 5.: Low-Use from 1.0 to 1.4 (never or almost never used) and 1.5 to 2.4

(usually not used); Medium-Use from 2.5 to 3.4 (sometimes used); and High-Use from 3.5 to 4.4 (usually used) and 4.5 to 5.0 (almost always or always used).

The responses were scored as (1) Never or almost never, (2) Usually not, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often and (5) Always or almost always. Then, the frequency analysis was performed on these scores. With the help of this calculation, the mean scores were obtained and ranged according to different levels of frequency from high to low use. The frequency of each language learning strategy use is listed below in accordance with the mean scores of the participants.

TABLE 1
THE FREQUENCY OF MEMORY STRATEGIES USE

Strategy No	Strategy	Means	Comment
3	I learn new words in sentences.	3.55	High-use range
1	I associate new English words with what I already know.	3.37	Medium-use range
5	I review often.	3.14	Medium-use range
7	I often review newly learned vocabulary or expressions by repeatedly mouthing.	3.11	Medium-use range
6	I often review newly learned vocabulary or expressions by repeatedly writing.	2.95	Medium-use range
2	I make drawing, either in my head or on paper, to help me remember a new word.	2.78	Medium-use range
4	I use flash cards to memorize new words.	2.23	Low-use range

In Table 1, it is apparent that participants preferred to use memory strategies at different levels of frequency (mean scores from 3.55 to 2.23). They highly preferred to learn the new words in sentences (mean score = 3.55). They widely tended to associate new English words with what they had already known (mean score = 3.37). They often selected memory strategies such as reviewing newly learned vocabulary or expressions by repeatedly mouthing (mean score = 3.11) and writing (mean score = 2.95). They sometimes preferred to make a drawing to remember a new word (mean score = 2.78). Although the participants claimed that they sometimes used all these memory strategies, they seldom preferred to use flashcards for remembering a new word (mean score = 2.23).

TABLE 2
THE FREQUENCY OF COGNITIVE STRATEGIES USE

Strategy No	Strategy	Means	Comment
16	I try to discover grammar rules of the English language.	3.52	High-use range
10	I often watch TV in English or I listen to English tapes or CDs.	3.45	Medium-use range
8	When I speak in English, I try to imitate English-speaking people, in order to pronounce the words correctly.	3.32	Medium-use range
15	I make an effort to understand the sense of what I read or hear without translating word for word.	3.32	Medium-use range
13	I try to find opportunities outside the school to practice my English.	3.10	Medium-use range
12	I work with English computer programs.	3.16	Medium-use range
14	I find similarities in pronunciation between Turkish and English.	2.87	Medium-use range
11	I read books in English.	2.75	Medium-use range
9	I often practice English alphabet sounds.	2.38	Low-use range

According to Table 2, young learners in this study preferred to use cognitive strategies at different levels of frequency (mean scores from 3.52 to 2.38). As mentioned above, the participants highly preferred to discover grammar rules of the English language (mean score = 3.52). Besides this highly used strategy, they claimed they widely watched TV in English or listened to English tapes (mean score = 3.45). They often preferred to imitate English-speaking people, in order to pronounce the words correctly and they generally tended to make an effort to understand the sense of what they read or hear without translating word for word (mean score = 3.32). In addition to this, they often marked some specific cognitive strategies such as finding opportunities outside the school to practice their English and working with English computer programs (mean scores = 3.10- 3.16). They sometimes preferred to find similarities in pronunciation between Turkish and English (mean score = 2.87) and they rarely tended to read books (mean score = 2.75). Even though the young learners in the study preferred to use these cognitive strategies with high and medium frequencies, they claimed that they rarely practiced English alphabet sounds (mean score = 2.38).

TABLE 3
THE FREQUENCY OF COMPENSATION STRATEGIES USE

Strategy No	Strategy	Means	Comment
17	When I hear or read a new word in English, I try to guess the meaning by looking at the rest of the sentence.	3.64	High-use range
19	When I don't know a word in English, I ask for help.	3.59	High-use range
18	When I have trouble in making myself understood in English, I use gestures to express what I want to say.	3.53	High-use range
20	When I can't find an expression in English, I try to find another way to say what I mean.	3.14	Medium-use range

The responses reveal that compensation strategies such as guessing the meaning of a new word without looking at the rest of the sentence (mean score = 3.64), asking for help when the word was unknown and using gestures to make

themselves understood were highly preferred (mean scores = 3.59,5.53). Besides these highly used compensation strategies, the students often tended to find other ways to express themselves in English (mean score = 3.14).

TABLE 4
THE FREQUENCY OF METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES USE

Strategy No	Strategy	Means	Comment
23	When someone speaks to me in English, I listen attentively.	3.86	High-use range
25	I analyse the errors I have made and try not to repeat them.	3.80	High-use range
24	I am concerned about my progress in learning English.	3.72	High-use range
22	I look for occasions to speak English.	3.10	Medium-use range
21	I organize my time to study English.	2.63	Medium-use range

The study found that the participants preferred metacognitive strategies at different levels of frequency (mean scores from 3.86 to 2.63). For instance, they claimed they highly used metacognitive strategies such as listening attentively when someone speaks in English, analysing their errors in order not to repeat them (mean scores = 3.86, 3.80) and being concerned about their progress in English (mean score = 3.7). Besides these highly used metacognitive strategies, they rarely preferred to look for occasions to speak English (mean score = 3.10). They seldom tended to organize their time to study English with a mean score of 2.63.

TABLE 5
THE FREQUENCY OF AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES USE

Strategy No	Strategy	Means	Comment
27	I will still encourage myself to speak English even if I am afraid to make mistakes.	3.67	High-use range
26	Whenever I am stressed by the idea of speaking English, I try to relax.	3.24	Medium-use range
28	When I succeed, I reward myself.	3.23	Medium-use range

The participants preferred to use affective strategies at different levels of frequency (mean scores from 3.67 to 3.23). For instance, they highly preferred to use affective strategies such as encouraging themselves to speak English (mean score = 3.67). In addition to this highly used affective strategy, the participants generally tended to relax in order to speak English and they often preferred to reward themselves when they succeed (mean scores = 3.24, 3.23).

TABLE 6
THE FREQUENCY OF SOCIAL STRATEGIES USE

Strategy No	Strategy	Means	Comment
29	If I don't understand what is said to me in English, I ask the person to help me by speaking slowly, repeating, or clarifying what has been said.	3.70	High-use range
31	I am interested in and willing to learn the culture of English speaking countries.	3.23	Medium-use range
30	I practice English with my parents, sibling or my classmates.	2.82	Medium-use range

Social strategies such as asking for help, repetition and clarification when something wasn't understood were highly preferred by the participants (mean score = 3.70). Besides these highly used social strategies, they often tended to learn the culture of English (mean score = 3.23) and preferred to practice English with the people around (mean score = 2.82).

An independent-samples t-test was applied to discover any possible significant difference between male and female students on the use of language learning strategies. According to t-test results, a significant difference between the males and females in terms of overall strategy use was found [$t_{(109)}=0,900, p<.05$]. All these analyses indicate that females, on average, prefer to use more language learning strategies than males do.

A t-test is also used to determine the homogeneity of the variance between the successful and average students. The t-test results found that the mean values for successful students ($M = 100.089$) are only slightly higher than the scores of the average ($M = 99.545$) students. This means that no significant difference is observed between successful and average students in terms of overall strategy use [$t_{(109)}=0,076, p>.05$].

IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The language learning strategy preferences of young Turkish learners were initially investigated in this paper. A frequency analysis was performed in order to find out the frequency use of language learning strategies among young learners. The result of the analysis revealed that as the learners had difficulty in memorizing and remembering the new words, they created lots of memory strategies. The participants frequently tended to associate new English words with what they had already known, so they could easily remember the new words without spending too much effort. In addition, they often reviewed newly learned vocabulary or expressions by mouthing and writing, so they easily kept the words in mind and discovered some connections among words.

The participants seldom preferred to use visuals such as drawings and flashcards to memorize and remember a new word. It was also found that the young learners developed some language learning strategies which affected their cognitive skills positively. For instance, they usually preferred to discover the grammar rules by themselves rather than wait for transmission of information. They generally tended to watch TV in English or listen to English tapes or CDs in order to create awareness towards the target language. They often preferred to understand the general sense of what they

read or heard without translating word for word, so they not only developed their comprehension abilities but also improved their guessing skills.

The private schools generally organize some out of school activities such as trips to foreign schools, connecting with other foreign school students via the internet and student exchange programs. As the participants in the current study had a chance to join these activities, they often preferred to use these out of school activities to practice their English.

They often tended to work with English computer programs so they had an opportunity to learn the language in a visually supported language learning environment.

The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of previous studies. In Boutier-Castaing (in Lan & Oxford, 2003), cognitive strategies such as error avoiding and overgeneralization of linguistic rules were reported as frequently used strategies among the children learning French as a second language. Hopper (1972) expanded on this fact and said that young learners try to discover grammar rules with unsuccessful overgeneralization. In another study, Wong Fillmore (1985) indicated that learners frequently encourage themselves to speak English with native English speakers even if they have imperfect English skills, which shows that they effectively use their social strategies.

In the current study, metacognitive strategies and compensation strategies are found to be widely preferred strategies by the young learners. The findings show similarity with the other research results. Yang (1992) found that compensation strategies were found the most frequently used strategies by the young learners, whereas memory strategies were found the least frequently used ones. Similarly, Karahan (2007) found in his research that compensation strategies (with 90.83%), metacognitive strategies (with 89.17%) and social strategies (with 82.50%) were the most frequently used by the participants of his study; however, cognitive strategies (with 62.50%) and memory strategies (with 35.83%) were the least frequently used ones.

Fleming and Walls (1998) conducted a study which had similarities and differences with the present study. They found that young learners more frequently applied metacognitive strategies such as planning. Contrary to our study, they found that those young learners used cognitive strategies more frequently in order to understand and use the target language.

The findings of this study also reveal a significant difference between the male and female students in terms of their language learning strategy use. According to the t-test results, females employed more language learning strategies than males did.

Consistent with the findings of the current study, in a majority of studies in the field, females were reported as applying far more language learning strategies than males did (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Oxford, 1993; Zoubir-Shaw & Oxford, R., 1995).

The results, on the other hand, are not consistent with several other studies which indicated that male learners applied language learning strategies more frequently than females did. For instance, Tran (1988) found that Vietnamese male immigrants applied more strategies than females did. Wharton (2000) conducted research on 678 university students who were learning Japanese and French in Singapore, and unexpectedly found that male students frequently applied LLS. Similar to these studies, Tercanlıoğlu (2004) also found the same result and concluded that "A possible explanation for this result may be that in the male-dominated Turkish society, female students may have lower self-esteem in reporting the strategy they use" (p. 190). As to the effect of language level on language strategy preference, the follow up t-test result revealed that there wasn't any significant difference between the successful students and the average students in terms of their language learning strategy preferences. Unlike the current study, most of the research reports that there is a significant relation between strategy use and L2 achievement and that students with high language proficiency tend to apply strategies more often (Bruen, 2001; Drayer & Oxford, 1996; Gan, Humprey & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Kayad, 1999; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Sheorey, 1999). In contrast to these studies, Nisbet, Tindel and Arroya (2005) found minimal correlations between language learning strategy preferences of the students and their proficiency level.

In this study, memory and compensation strategies were found to be the least frequently preferred language learning strategies. In order to increase students' use of these strategies, some specific innovations can be made. Semantic mapping, word charts and word maps are suggested in order to organize, construct and remember the new words. Dictionary use should also be encouraged as it helps learners to find the common underlying meaning of the words and to relate them to already known words. Besides memory strategies, cognitive strategies are also found to be rarely used by the young learners. In order to improve the use of these strategies, visual and audio-lingual materials that have positive contributions to language learning should commonly be used during the language learning process. Teachers should also encourage their learners to read books in the target language and work with English computer programs.

On the basis of the results, it is highly recommended that the language learning environment should be carefully designed in order to stimulate learners' natural interest towards language learning. Because teachers have an important role in the language learning process, they should be aware of what language learning strategies their students prefer to use and accordingly they should deliver strategy instruction to their students as an important part of the foreign language curriculum. They should also integrate strategies into everyday classroom activities and materials while considering their students' LLS selections (Cohen, 1998).

Memory strategies such as drawing to remember a new word and reviewing newly learned vocabulary or expressions by repeatedly writing and practicing English with friends and relatives are less frequently preferred by the participants.

In order to improve these strategies, more interactive activities may be selected for memorizing and remembering the new words. More effective techniques are also suggested for reviewing newly learned vocabulary.

The study also discovered that the participants rarely prefer to use social strategies such as practicing English with their parents and classmates. In order to improve social strategies, it is advised that more playful learning environments be designed for practising English.

The research was conducted only on private primary school students; further research should be carried out to find out the possible similarities or differences between state and private primary school students in terms of LLS preferences.

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