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Abstract

This study employed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) developed by Oxford (1990) to examine differences in language-learning strategy use. It focused on how learner factors such as gender, age, nationality, and proficiency level influence the choice of language-learning strategies. The participants were 75 international students at Ohio University. The results showed that participants used social and metacognitive strategies at a high frequency level; meanwhile, affective and memory strategies were selected the least. Statistic significance was found in the choice of several strategies across the factors examined. Pedagogical implications were also discussed.

Introduction

Many studies in the field of second language acquisition have focused on the question of why some language learners succeed, but some do not, and have tried to explore strategies that successful learners use in their learning (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2007; Liu, 2006; Teicher, 2006). It has been established that there are strategies that help language learners achieve their goals, good language learners sometimes use different strategies than poorer language learners (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Liu, 2006), and successful and experienced language learners use language-learning strategies more frequently and more effectively than poorer language learners (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). Studies have also indicated that the choice of strategies is subject to learners' levels of proficiency, their age, and their gender; and learners might use strategies at different frequency levels or prefer certain strategies to the others, depending on their individual personalities and learning environment (Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Schmais, 2003).

Definitions

Over the past decades, researchers have viewed language-learning strategies in association with *behaviors* and *thoughts* (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986); *techniques, approaches,* or *deliberate actions* (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990); or *behaviors* or *actions* (Oxford, 1990). Green and Oxford (1995) suggested that language-learning strategies are *specific actions* or *techniques* that students use, often intentionally, to improve their target language skills. Ellis (1994) defined language-learning strategies as *attempts* to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language. Cohen (1998) defined learning strategies as *processes* which learners use consciously in enhancing the *storage, retention, recall, and application of knowledge* about the language that they are learning. In Cohen and Dornyei (2002) language-learning strategies were defined as

the "conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors" (p. 46) used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language.

Language-learning strategies have been approached mainly from two aspects: skills and processes. Skill areas include listening, reading, speaking, writing, vocabulary, and translation (Cohen, 1990). Processes, on the other hand, are usually grouped into four domains: cognitive, metacognitive, and social or affective strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Cognitive strategies are those that deal with identification, grouping, retention, and storage of language materials. Metacognitive strategies are processes which learners use consciously in order to manage their language learning. These strategies allow learners to control their cognition by planning, checking, and evaluating what they learn. Affective strategies involve emotions, motivation, and attitudes which learners can employ to reduce anxiety, self-encourage, and so forth, to promote learning positively. Social strategies include actions which language learners use to interact with other learners or with native speakers.

Research into language-learning strategies has indicated great interest in identifying the use of learning strategies by ESL/EFL learners (Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Schmais, 2003). Nevertheless, there are few studies dedicated specifically to the characteristics that influence English learners on the choice of learning strategies in a particular ESL context (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). An ESL context is one in which students learn English in an English-speaking country such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia.

Literature Review

Whereas learning strategies had been studied very early, this topic began to draw attention from researchers in the field of second language acquisition around the late 1970s. Whereas O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and O'Malley, Cham-

ot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, and Kupper (1985) had a more theoretical focus on this issue; Oxford (1990, 1994), Green and Oxford (1995), Oxford and Ehrman (1995), and Oxford and Nyikos (1989) were more interested in how different learners apply strategies and what processes influence their choices. More research had been inspired by the latter focus. For example, studies have examined varied factors such as proficiency levels, age, gender (Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Shmais, 2003), ethnicity (Grainger, 1997), nationality (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006), career choices and psychological type (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989), disciplines (Peacock & Ho, 2003), among others. Findings from these studies have revealed that there is not a unique strategy that every learner should apply in order to be successful in learning the target language. Rather, choice of strategy is dependent upon a person's cultural and psychological background and the learning context.

The SILL

Oxford (1990) devised an instrument for assessing the frequency of use of language strategies called Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, known in brief as "the SILL." The strategies are grouped into six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. The SILL has been used by various studies focusing on language-learning strategies.

Specifically, Green & Oxford (1995) examined strategy use at the individual item level by students in three different proficiency levels (pre-basic, basic, and intermediate), and by gender factor (male versus female) in Puerto Rico. The research found that learning strategies were used more frequently among more successful language learners; and female learners used more strategies than male counterparts did. It was determined that there were more complex patterns of use than previous studies had revealed. For both factors, the target language (L2) proficiency level and gender, only some items showed significant variation; and significant variation by proficiency level did not invariably mean more frequent strategy use by more successful students.

Shmais (2003) reported on the current English language-learning strategies used by Arabic-speaking English majors in Palestine, which is an EFL context. It was found that the most preferred strategies are metacognitive strategies, and the least favored are compensation strategies. The study concluded that gender and proficiency had no significant effect on the use of strategies.

Hong-Nam and Levell (2006) examined the overall language-learning strategy use of English learners enrolled in a college Intensive English Program (IEP), which is an intensive ESL learning environment. The study revealed that students in the intermediate level reported more use of learning strategies than beginning and advanced levels. More strategic language learners advance along the proficiency continuum faster than less strategic ones. It was also found that the students preferred to use metacognitive strategies most, whereas they showed the least use of affective and memory strategies. Females tended to use affective and social strategies more frequently than males.

To sum up, studies have attempted to address the question of how language learners use learning strategies in terms of proficiency levels and gender. Common findings indicate that language learners, disregarding the gender factor, favored metacognitive strategies. Meanwhile, compensation strategies were in the medium range of use in an ESL context (the United States), but they were not favored in the EFL (Palestine) or hybrid ESL/EFL environment (Puerto Rico). Nevertheless, there are still areas where research has not come up with consistent findings such as why certain strategies are preferred by a group of learners and others are not. Also, as Ehrman and Oxford (1989) suggested, career choice and psychological type, among other factors, could also influence the choice of language-learning strategies among language learners.

This study is not just an attempt to replicate previous studies; this is, to find out more evidence on how factors such as proficiency level, gender, and nationality influence learning strategy use by SILL categories of learners of English in an ESL context. We also wish to examine if age, academic major, and L2 learning experience have any effect. We therefore focus on the following questions:

1. What are the common patterns of the use of language-learning strategies of learners in an ESL context?

2. Do factors such as proficiency level, age, gender, nationality, academic major, and L2 learning experience influence the learners' choices of strategies?

Methodology

This study was conducted at Ohio University in the United States, using the SILL developed by Oxford (1990) and a demographic questionnaire which took the participants 25 to 30 minutes to fill out (paper-and-pencil). The participants, who were selected by stratified sampling, included 75 international students from three sub-groups (Linguistics, English, and non-English majors) at Ohio University. The linguistic group consisted of mostly graduate students who have considerable background in English learning as well as teaching (most of them are or will become English teachers). The English group included students who were studying English for communication purposes only (not English major students). This group had the most varied proficiency levels (beginner, pre-intermediate, intermediate, advanced). The non-English-major group comprised students from different academic programs other than English or Linguistics. These students needed to take focused courses to improve certain English skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing). The participants hailed from Asia, Latin America, and Europe (21 different countries). Their ages ranged from 18 to 50. A small number of participants (8%) have just started learning English for less than a year. Others have learned the language for several up to twenty years. Their TOEFL scores ranged from 400 to 643. The participants were asked

to self-report their TOEFL scores. It was expected that the information provided in this regard is reliable since there was no identity question in the SILL as well as in the demographic questionnaires. Moreover, the purpose of the study was fully communicated to the participants. Yet, some of the participants did not report their TOEFL scores (they either had not taken the test yet or did not want to report). These participants were treated as a separate group beside the three groups whose proficiency levels were determined by TOEFL scores (see Table 1 for more details).

Data analyses included the computation of descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation, and frequencies) to compile information about demographics of the participants and to calculate overall strategy use. In order to determine any variation in strategy use relative to age, gender, and cultural backgrounds, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted using these factors as independent variables and

Table 1
Demographic information of participants

	n
Age:	
(1) from 18 to 25	47
(2) from 26 to 35	23
(3) above 35	5
Gender:	
(1) male	32
(2) female	43
Geographic areas	
(1) students from Asian countries	64
(2) students from African countries	11
(3) students from Latin American countries	4
Majors:	
(1) Linguistics	19
(2) English	20
(3) Other majors	36
Proficiency level:	
(1) TOEFL scores below 500,	26
(2) TOEFL scores from 500 to 549,	10
(3) TOEFL scores from 550 and above	20
(4) TOEFL scores not reported.	19
Self-evaluation of proficiency:	
(1) poor	6
(2) fair	24
(3) good	35
(4) excellent	10

the six categories of strategies as dependent variables. The Cronbach's Alpha for the variables in this study is .899 (or .90) which is in the expected range of the SILL's reliability (Oxford & Ehrman, 1995).

Findings and Discussion

Research question 1: What are the common patterns of the use of language-learning strategies of learners in an ESL context?

Table 2 provides a brief description of the participants' scores on the SILL. Generally, the participants of this study used language learning at medium (within the range from 2.5 to 3.4) or high frequency (within the range from 3.5 to 5.0) as can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 1. Specifically, social strategy ranked top ($M = 3.70$), followed immediately by metacognitive strategy ($M = 3.58$). Cognitive and compensation strategies shared the middle position with $M = 3.48$, and 3.46, respectively. Affective and memory strategies filled up the other end of the scale with $M = 3.11$, and 3.10, respectively. Individually, the most frequently used strategy was a social strategy: *"I ask questions in English"* with a mean score of $M = 4.09$. The least used strategies were memory strategy exemplified in phrases such as "I used flashcards to remember new English words" and affective strategy, reflected in such phrases as "I write down my own feelings in a language-learning diary." Both had $M = 2.31$.

In sum, there were four groups of strategies used at a high frequency (social, metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies).The two remaining strategies, memory and affective strategies, were used at a lower frequency. Figure 1 represents the frequency of use of strategies by the mean of scores acquired for each group of strategies. It can be seen that there is not much overall difference in the participants' preference for each strategy group.

Results from other studies have also revealed that social strategies and metacognitive strategies are frequently used. However, metacognitive strategies are favored slightly more and actually ranked on top (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Shmais, 2003). Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) explained that an intensive English learning environment could have an influence on the learner's choice of strategies, which accounts for the fact that her participants used metacognitive strategies more (metacognitive strategies deal with the control of planning, organizing, focusing, and evaluating learning).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Memory (Mem.) strategies	75	3.10	0.74	1.11	4.78
Cognitive (Cog.) strategies	75	3.48	0.73	1.43	4.64
Compensation (Com.) strategies	75	3.46	0.82	1.17	5.00
Metacognitive (Met.) Strategies	75	3.58	0.85	1.22	5.00
Affective (Aff.) strategies	75	3.12	0.76	1.00	4.83
Social (Soc.) strategies	75	3.70	0.86	1.00	5.00

Nevertheless, the learning environment does not necessarily interfere with the preference of metacognitive strategies since Shmais also found that university English students in a regular academic foreign language-learning environment showed a similar trend in the use of metacognitive strategy.

Furthermore, studies by Wharton (2000) and Griffiths and Parr (2001) correspondingly demonstrated that social strategies were selected most regularly in both ESL and EFL learning environments. Social strategies place an emphasis on cooperative learning and asking questions to facilitate interaction. The participants of this research learn in an academic environment where people around them are mostly native speakers of English or speakers of other languages different than their own. They are therefore compelled to interact in English and ask questions for comprehension. This is especially true for the linguistics and English students because their classmates are mainly international students who might speak non-standard English. This probably explains why strategies such as "I ask questions in English" or "If I do not understand something in English, I ask the person to slow down or say it again" are used routinely by these respondents.

Affective strategies and memory strategies are employed less often. This indicates an outcome consistent with studies by Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006), Shmais (2003), Wharton (2000), and Griffiths and Parr (2001). It is commonly as-
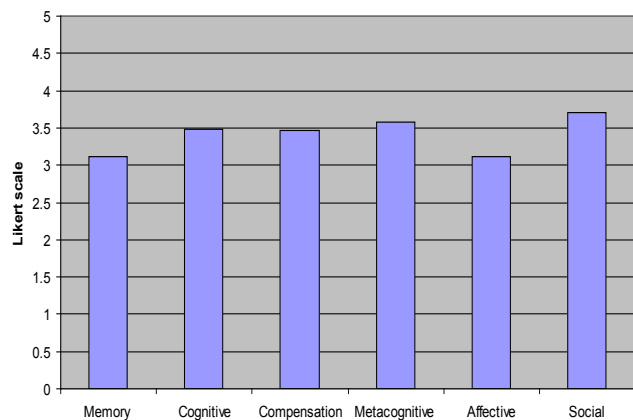

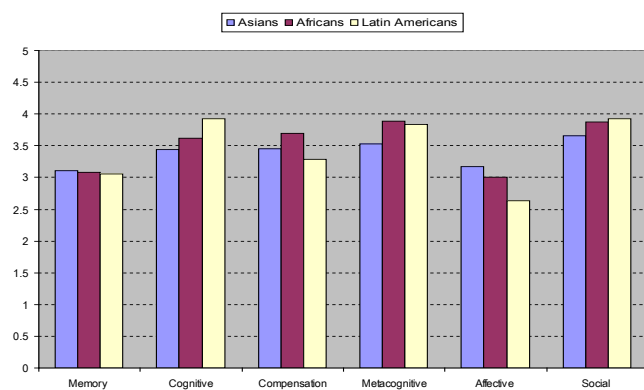*Figure 1.* Overall strategy use

Figure 2. Use of language-learning strategies by nationality.

sumed that Asian students might prefer memory strategies to communication strategies (interpersonal interaction, cooperative learning, for example) because of their traditional approach to or styles of teaching and learning. It seems that Asian students have used more similar language-learning strategies like students in other areas of the world. However, it is interesting to note a slight difference in the use of memory strategy by the Asian group of this study in comparison to that by their fellow students from Africa and Latin America (as displayed in Figure 2).

Research question 2: Do factors such as proficiency level, age, gender, nationality, academic major, and L2 learning experience influence the learners' choices of strategies?

Use of strategies by proficiency level (based on TOEFL scores)

As displayed in Table 3, the results of the one-way ANOVA of strategy use by proficiency level show that the group with TOEFL scores of above 550 (or advanced level) used more strategies than the other groups ($M = 3.58$). This group also reported the most frequent use of social strategies. This table also shows that memory strategies had the least frequent use at $M = 3.01$ for the group with TOEFL scores not reported. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies were at high frequency for T1 and T4, but they were at medium frequency for T2 and T3. As observed, there was a statistical significant difference in the use of cognitive strategies ($p < .05$) in terms of proficiency levels. As for the rest, no statistically significant differences could be found.

Cognitive strategies prescribe that learners learn by linking new information with existing schemata, analyzing and classifying new information, deep processing, forming and revising internal mental models, and receiving and producing messages in the target language (Oxford, 1990, p. 16). Learners with lower proficiency levels may have difficulty handling these strategies. Indeed, this study found a significant difference in the use of cognitive strategy across proficiency levels. The advanced learners reported more frequent use ($M = 3.72$), whereas people from a lower proficiency level reported a mean score of $M = 3.17$, which is considerably different.

Overall, results from the one-way ANOVA shows that advanced learners use more strategies than lower proficiency learners do. This conclusion is consistent with findings by Green and Oxford (1995) and Wharton (2000). However, when we examined the use of individual strategy categories, we found more variations. The group with TOEFL scores above 550 topped every other group in the use of cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies; yet it was surpassed by the group with TOEFL scores below 450 in regards to memory and affective strategies. This particular group outranked all other groups in the use of these two particular strategies which reflect well their learning experiences and proficiency.

Use of strategies by gender

As can be seen from Figure 3, the male group used learning strategies at a slightly higher frequency than the female group ($M = 3.43$, $M = 3.38$, respectively). Both groups exhibited use of memory, and cognitive and affective strategies at medium frequency, but a high frequency of use for social strategies and metacognitive strategies ($M > 3.50$). Whereas they did not lean much on compensation strategies (the male group likes this strategy category better than the female group), they did so for the affective strategies.

Even though the results did not show a statistically significant difference in the use of learning strategies by gender, by comparison of mean values alone it does reveal a result consistent with previous studies that show females' tendency to use more strategies than males (Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam & Levell, 2006; and Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). Male learners, however, used more metacognitive strategies than females. This suggests males like organizing, planning, and self-monitoring their learning, whereas females might like building social relationships to support their learning.

Use of strategies by age

Table 4 shows that there was a statistically significant difference in the use of cognitive, metacognitve, and affective strategies ($p < .05$) between age groups. The A3 group (including participants who were above 35 years old) had a high frequency of use for compensation strategies and a medium frequency of use for the rest of the strategies. This

group also used slightly more memory strategies than the other two groups and had a much lower mean score on the use of affective strategies than those who were younger than 35 ($M = 2.5$ in comparisons to $M = 3.04$ and 3.36). Social strategies was used most by the group with ages ranging from 25 to 35 ($M = 4.01$).

According to these results, age factor seemed to cause some differences in the use of strategies. Specifically, the age group between 25 and 35 showed a statistically significant difference with the other groups in their use of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies (much more frequent in cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and more frequent in affective strategy). The oldest group displays a very low use of affective strategy ($M = 2.5$). This might be because they are more experienced and mature in handling their feelings, learning attitudes, and their motivations than are the younger
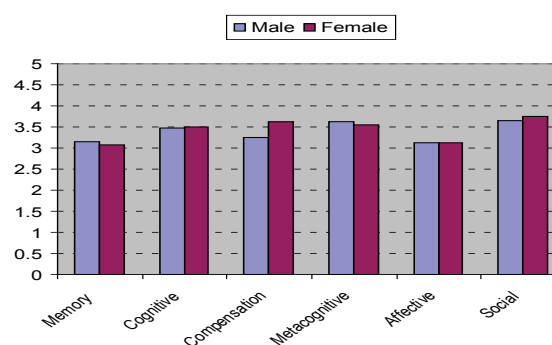

Figure 3. Use of strategies by gender

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for the variables and one-way ANOVA/F-tests for main difference between the six strategy categories in terms of proficiency

	Not reported *		Below 449*		450-549*		Above 550*			
Variables	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	sig.
Mem. strategies	3.01	0.96	3.32	0.40	3.04	0.63	3.19	0.80	.52	.67
Cog. strategies	3.68	0.79	3.48	0.60	3.17	0.82	3.72	0.44	2.98	.04
Com. strategies	3.37	1.00	3.26	0.28	3.40	0.91	3.73	0.63	1.04	.38
Met. Strategies	3.85	0.89	3.31	0.59	3.37	0.93	3.74	0.78	1.75	.16
Aff. strategies	3.03	0.97	3.26	0.87	3.11	0.67	3.16	0.68	.20	.89
Soc. strategies	3.68	1.06	3.78	0.74	3.53	0.96	3.92	0.48	.81	.49

* TOEFL scores

Table 4

Descriptive statistics for the variables and one-way ANOVA/F-tests for main difference between the six strategy categories by age

	A1 (below 25)		A2 (25 - 35)		A3 (above 35)			
Variables	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	Sig
Mem. strategies	2.94	0.74	3.33	0.73	3.35	0.5	2.74	0.07
Cog. strategies	3.24	0.82	3.88	0.39	3.4	0.5	7.35	0.00
Com. strategies	3.31	0.82	3.71	0.77	3.5	0.92	2.06	0.14
Met. Strategies	3.37	0.9	3.98	0.67	3.29	0.71	5.10	0.01
Aff. strategies	3.04	0.78	3.36	0.66	2.5	0.94	3.44	0.04
Soc. strategies	3.54	0.94	4.01	0.67	3.47	0.77	2.80	0.07

learners. Oxford (1994) also discussed the possibility of differences in language-learning strategy use by age factor; in particular, older learners would tend to employ more strategies (in this study the Means of strategy use for the group under 25 years old and for the group above 25 years old are 3.23 and 3.48, respectively).

Use of strategies by nationality

Descriptive statistics for main differences between the groups by nationality reveals that the African group used strategies at a high frequency whereas its Asian and Latin American partners used strategies at medium frequency (M = 3.53; 3.39; 3.44, respectively; see Table 2). Affective strategies received the lowest attention by the Latin American group (M = 2.63). The three groups had a similar taste for memory strategies (M < 3.50) and social strategies (M > 3.50).

As mentioned before, there was no statistically significant difference among nationality groups in their use of strategies. According to Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006), there might be more differences within groups than between groups. Even so, Figure 2 shows us that people from different areas of the world use strategies differently from each other. As can be seen, Latin Americans seemed to use more cognitive strategies but they do not do so with affective strategies. African learners topped in the use of metacognitive and compensation strategies and occupied the middle position for the rest strategy groups. The Asians only outrank their partners in the use of memory and affective strategies; which is not an unexpected finding as Oxford (1994) pointed out that "[r]ote memorization and other forms of memorization were more prevalent among some Asian students than among students from other cultural backgrounds" (Oxford, 1994).

Conclusions and Implications

The participants of this study preferred social strategies the most and did not often use affective or memory strategies. Such preferences have been noticed in previous studies (Wharton, 2000; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995). Even though it was assumed that the inspected factors (proficiency level, age, gender, nationality) would bring about influences on the learner's choice of strategies, this assumption has not always been supported. Some factors might yield a statistically significant difference in the use of certain strategies, but not necessarily in all six categories.

We acknowledge that the SILL has been criticized for a heavy focus on vocabulary memorizing, which might be helpful in the initial stage of learning the target language, but for more advanced learners who have accumulated a considerable amount of vocabulary, might find some strategies in the SILL not very applicable. Nevertheless, some of our findings have confirmed with literature that language learners differ in language-learning strategy use. There is not an implication for "good" strategies that all learners should use to enhance their language learning. Some strategies are

preferred, but that does not necessarily mean they are better than the others.

It is important that both learners and teachers become aware of their preferences for learning strategies in the learning process. In particular, teachers should have a sufficient training in strategy instruction in order to assist students in pinpointing appropriate learning strategies so as to advance. Along with helping students build up a good command of language-learning strategies, teachers should watch for the risk of imposing their own preference for strategy use on the students. Students should be trained to use language-learning strategies through various practices, which are incorporated into teaching plans and regular class activities (Oxford, 1990).

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