How do monolingual and bilingual language learners differ in use of learning strategies while learning a foreign language? Evidences from Mersin University

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Abstract

This study investigates the difference between monolingual and bilingual learners in terms of use of the language learning strategies. The participants of the study were monolingual and bilingual students, making a total number of 246 (162 F/84 M) studying English as a foreign language at Mersin University ELT department. The study also reports on the use of the language learning strategies according to the languages the students have acquired, gender and proficiency variables. The results of this study indicated that contrary to gender and proficiency, bilingualism had a significant difference on the use of strategies.

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1. Introduction

For the last few years, the researchers have been trying to find out the factors or variables affecting the foreign language learning. The researchers have also been interested in the distinction between the successful learners from less successful learners. As success is seen the result of some variables, researchers stressed that learning strategy use is one of the significant variables affecting language learning.

Learning strategies have been defined by many researchers and they all pointed out that the successful learners use various strategies and techniques effectively in order to solve the problems they face while learning or acquiring a language. It has also been stated by researchers that these strategies enable students to gain more responsibility for their own learning and progress.

The investigations about bi- or monolingual students’ use of learning strategies have been conducted all over the world especially in English speaking countries like USA. Moreover, a specific study about the learning strategy use of bilinguals was conducted in Singapore. The participants of previous researches especially in USA were all monolingual, however, it is easy to find many bi- or multilingual language learners all over the world and it can be

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expected from them to be good at languages as they acquire more languages when compared with the monolingual language learners.

This study aims to investigate the difference between monolingual and bilingual foreign language learners in terms of use of learning strategies while learning a language. It is also aimed to find out whether variables such as gender and proficiency affect the use of learning strategies.

The following research questions will guide this present study:

1) How do monolingual and bilingual foreign language learners differ in use of learning strategies while learning a foreign language?

2) In terms of gender, is there any difference between monolingual and bilingual foreign language learners’ use of learning strategies?

3) How does the proficiency level affect the use of language learning strategies?

1.1 Literature review

It has been generally assumed that there are some cognitive and social variables that contribute to and affect language learning. The most distinguished one among these variables is that of language learning strategy use.

“Learning strategies can be defined as behaviours and thoughts in which a learner engages and which are intended to influence the learner’s encoding process” (Mayer and Weinstein, 1983, p. 3). On the other hand, The importance and effect of the learning strategies on language learning has been investigated by many researchers. Skehan (as cited in Green and Oxford, 1995, p.262) “focused on language learning strategies as one of the most important individual difference factors in L2 acquisition.” Oxford (as cited in Shmais, W. A. 2003, p.1) indicated that “LLSs, are steps taken by the learners in order to improve language training and develop language competence and divided the strategies into direct and indirect involving information, memory behaviors, vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, thought and mental processes.” The investigations about the use of language learning strategies have generally been conducted in countries where English is the official language like USA. However, not many studies have been conducted about the use of learning strategies in other countries where bi- or multilingual speakers are available. Wharton (2000) stated that “When researchers have examined strategy use outside the United States, they have generally used English as a foreign language (EFL) and ESL students (generally monolingual) as their participants” (p. 205). It has been stated by researchers that knowledge of more than one language facilitates the acquisition of additional languages. Supporting this claim, Hakuta (1990) stated that “Bilingualism can lead to superior performance on a variety of intellectual skills” (p. 7).

Several factors are claimed to affect the types and frequency of use of learning strategies. One of these factors, language proficiency is thought to affect the use of learning strategy. Green and Oxford (1995) stated that “More proficient language learners use more learning strategies and more types of strategies than less proficient language learners” (p. 285). An another factor assumed to affect the use of learning strategies is gender. In their study, Green and Oxford (1995) also found higher overall use of learning strategies by women than men. Moreover, Females use more social learning strategies than men. (Politzer, 1983).

As a result of all the suggestions and statements of the scientists it can be concluded that learning strategy use is an important variable affecting the language learning and some factors such as bilingualism, gender and language proficiency affect the use of language learning strategies.

2. Method

The participants of the study are monolingual and bilingual students, making a total number of 245 (162F/84M), studying English as a foreign language at Mersin University ELT department.

In order to measure strategy use, the SILL scale prepared by Oxford consisting of 50 Likert-type statements was used in this study.

This study employed statistical calculations (T test, one way ANOVA, Post Hoc Test) and a scale in measuring the rate of use of the language learning strategies of the learners.
2.1 Findings and discussions

The analysis of the data was first started with the grouping of the statements of the scale in terms of the group of strategy they belong to. The SILL scales including a background questionnaire, which were given to the students to fill in were analyzed with the SPSS programme.

**What is the level of difference between monolingual and bilingual learners in use of learning strategies while learning a foreign language?**

The analysis of the scales was conducted based on the premise that bilingual learners make use of learning strategies more than monolingual learners. In order to verify the premise stated, the analysis results of the learners were taken into consideration. “t” test results of independent groups in terms of use of learning strategies regarding the number of languages acquired indicated that the “p” of the use of language learning strategies in each group is below 0.005. Therefore, it can be stated that there is a meaningful difference in terms of the use of language learning strategies between monolingual and bilingual students. Showing this study as evidence, it can be claimed that there is a positive correlation between the strategy use and bilingualism. As inferred from the results, bilinguals show a greater overall use of language learning strategies compared to monolinguals. On the other hand, bilinguals are more advantageous than monolinguals in the process of language learning because they are intrinsically motivated. The source of this motivation may be the previous success at acquiring or learning other languages. Similarly, Wharton stated that “Bilinguals’ use of strategies has been reinforced by previous success at acquiring or learning other languages” (p. 230).

**How do male and female students differ in use of learning strategies while learning a foreign language?**

Whether males or females make use of more language learning strategies is another significant question that needs to be answered. In order to find an answer to this question an analysis of male and female students’ scales is conducted by making use of the SPSS programme. “t” test results of independent groups in terms of use of learning strategies regarding the gender difference indicate that the “p” of the use of language learning strategies in each group is over 0.5 except the Affective strategy group. Therefore, it can be stated that there is a meaningful difference in terms of use of language learning strategies between male and female learners only in Affective strategies. In terms of gender, females are supposed to outperform males in learning languages. James, A. Coleman (1997) supporting the idea that females are more successful, stated the reasons of this success as “Females tend to show greater integrative motivation and more positive attitudes to use a wide range of strategies, have more positive aspect towards learning, are more willing risk-takers” (p. 17). In this study, the rate of males’ and females’ use of learning strategies shows a small difference and this may be a kind of contradictory to the general belief and effects of gender in use of learning strategies. Wharton (2000) stated that “Gender-related differences generally are probably due to a combination of socialization and physiology” (p. 235).

**In terms of proficiency level, Is there any difference between monolingual and bilingual foreign language learners’ use of learning strategies?**

To determine the effect of learning level variable on strategy use, one way ANOVA was used and the results of the analysis are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. indicates the difference between the proficiency levels and their use of language learning strategies. Using of ANOVA (F) Test indicated that there were no significant differences on Metacognitive, and Affective strategies while there were significant differences on Memory, Cognitive, Compensation and Social strategies. The findings from ANOVA and post hoc test indicate that there is a relationship between strategy use in general and proficiency. Most of the strategies are used by the proficient learners including some specific differences in the strategy use between the grades of the learners. On the other hand, some strategy groups (Metacognitive, Affective) did not show a variation by proficiency level which shows us that both the proficient and non-proficient learners used the same amount of strategies belonging to these groups.
Table 3. In terms of foreign language learning strategies, One Way ANOVA results regarding the proficiency level difference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Groups</th>
<th>SS Between</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS Between</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>476, 320</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>119, 080</td>
<td>4, 415</td>
<td>0, 002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>6500, 688</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>26, 974</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>0, 002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1434, 555</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>358, 639</td>
<td>6, 431</td>
<td>0, 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>13440, 604</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>55, 770</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>0, 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>269, 619</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67, 405</td>
<td>6, 098</td>
<td>0, 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>2663, 864</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>11, 053</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>0, 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>256, 474</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>64, 119</td>
<td>2, 577</td>
<td>0, 038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>5995, 660</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>24, 878</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>0, 038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>177, 852</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44, 463</td>
<td>2, 443</td>
<td>0, 047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>4386, 522</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>18, 201</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>0, 047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>102,256</td>
<td>4, 577</td>
<td>0, 001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>22, 343</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>0, 001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* > Post Hoc Test Results
*Note: 0: Prep. Class, 1: First grade, 2: Second grade, 3: Third grade, 4: Fourth Grade
* Strategy Groups: A: Memory B: Cognitive C: Compensation D: Metacognitive E: Affective F: Social

2.2 Implications

This study is conducted with the hope of revealing some new information about the use of language learning strategies by different learner groups. While some contradictory and striking results have been found out, common results observed in the previous researches has also been seen in this study. The role of learning strategies in the learning process is certain, however, the teacher should also make use of and teach them to the students. Therefore, teachers’ role in strategy training is significant. When the students know the strategies, they will be aware of their learning process and this will result in more effective learning. As Nunan(1998) stated “Learners who are taught the strategies underlying their learning are more highly motivated than those who are not” (p. 172). On the other hand, the teacher should also integrate these strategies into the learning process because this makes it easier for learners to apply these strategies into language learning. Tasks should be prepared taking the learning strategies into consideration and each task should be underlied by at least one strategy. Therefore, the teacher should select the materials used in language teaching elaborately and analyze them to see whether they include the learning strategies in their tasks, activities or not. It should also be emphasized that teachers need to design their lessons in a way that enhances strategy use or learning within the learning process.

3. Conclusion
How do monolingual and bilingual foreign language learners differ in use of learning strategies while learning a foreign language?

Bilinguals show a greater use of strategy when compared with the monolinguals. This might be due to the success at learning previous languages and experience of learning more than two languages. Moreover, bilinguals have an advantage like employing cognitive and metacognitive skills while learning a language which suggests that bilinguals are more advantageous in the learning process.

In terms of gender, is there any difference between monolingual and bilingual foreign language learners’ use of learning strategies?

The fact that females’ dominance in language learning is a worldwide known phenomenon. Although some facts about the gender-related use of strategies are found in this study, the results failed to state the expected more frequent use of learning strategies by females which may stem from different reasons. On the contrary, males are found to be making use of some more specific learning strategies than females.

How does the proficiency level affect the use of language learning strategies?

This study suggests that more proficient learners make use of more learning strategies than less proficient learners. However, some specific differences in use of learning strategies are also observed. The fact that there is a linear relationship between strategy use in general and proficiency cannot be rejected. On the other hand, the conditions, culture or previous language learning experiences may have a slight effect on the proficient learners’ use of learning strategies.

References


