

Language learning strategies of students in Content-Based Instruction

Abstract

This study investigates the learning strategies of students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The study was mainly motivated by concerns about the standards of English of graduates of Malaysian universities. These concerns have also been expressed by the IIUM, one of the few universities in Malaysia using English as the medium of instruction. The primary objective of this research has been to identify what good language learners do to learn a second language. The study investigated frequency of strategy use according to type of courses (i.e. content-based versus non content-based), gender, and proficiency levels. There were 312 students taking English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. Their learning strategies were investigated through an analysis of their responses to Rebecca Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990), an instrument that has been validated in a number of studies. The study found that the students from the different degree programmes differed in the use of the six different strategies. The study also did not find any significant relationship between language learning strategies and gender.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), Language learning strategies, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning.

Introduction

Language learning and teaching have evolved from a teacher-centred to a more student-centred approach and as a result the interest to see how the students themselves learn a language has become a crucial area of study. As students are responsible for their own learning, looking at the strategies they adopt in language learning could give insights into the importance of the different strategies used, the extent to which they are used, and the factors that influence strategy use. This interest in language learning strategies is evident based on a good number of valuable research on language learning strategies in the different ESL and EFL contexts (e.g., Abdolmehdi Riazi, 2007; Kamarul Shukri et.al., 2009; Abu Shmais, 2003; Li, 2005).

Development in cognitive psychology has influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies. The language learning strategies have been classified into metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective strategies. Rubin (1987), for example, classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. Oxford (1990a) refers to language learning strategies as the steps taken by the learners in order to improve language training and develop language competence, dividing the strategies into direct and indirect involving information, memory behaviors, vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, thought and mental processes.

From the research to date, it is evident that language learners use language learning strategies of some kind; however, the frequency and variety of use vary between different learners and depend on a number of variables (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). In general, it is agreed that the use of language learning strategies is positively related to language proficiency. It appears that good language learners combine their use of particular types of strategies in effective ways (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1993).

There has also been research indicating that more proficient learners seem to employ a variety of strategies in many situations than do less proficient learners. Support for this has been found in Rossi-Le's (1989) study which found that more proficient English as Foreign Language (EFL) students used self-management strategies such as planning, evaluation and formal practice significantly more often than less proficient students.

Good language learners seemed to possess abilities to succeed while others lacked those abilities (Rubin & Thompson, 1994). Good learners, according to them, can find their own way by taking charge of their learning, organizing their language information and making their own opportunities for practicing using the language. In

addition, they use linguistic knowledge and contextual cues to help them in comprehension while learning a foreign language.

Although research into language learning strategies began as early as in the 1960s, the primary concern in most of the research on language learning strategies has been on identifying what good language learners do to learn a second language. This was reflected in the particular importance given to the metacognitive strategies which include planning and directing or monitoring as found in Rossi-Le (1989).

Research has also shown that factors other than language proficiency exert influence on the strategies that the language learners select and use. Gender, for example, was one factor that has been explored by many researchers. In many EFL strategy frequency studies involving gender, females have been found to be the more frequent users of strategies (Green, 1992; Noguchi, 1991; Green & Oxford, 1993; Oxford, 1993). Research on Language learning strategies have also focused on other factors that affect strategy use such as cultural background (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995), learning styles (Sheorey, 1998; Oxford et. al, 1991) and learners' self-efficacy beliefs (Yang, Nae-Dong 1999). The above mentioned factors have been proposed as factors influencing language strategy use.

Li (2005), in addition to proficiency and perceived language difficulties, also looked at gender in relation to the language learning strategies. Li's findings suggest that Chinese students, generally, not only used fewer strategies but also used them with low frequency. This would further suggest that the students changed the strategy use according to the change in the language environment.

Abdolmehdi Riazi,(2007) conducted a study in another EFL context to find out the general patterns of strategy use among 120 female Arabic-speaking students in terms of their overall strategy use. He found that higher level students use the language learning strategies more automatically and faster, and that lower level students use more of compensation strategies. Participants in general, however, tend to use metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies more than social, affective, and memory strategies. Riazi also concluded that their overall use of language learning strategies are not much different from other cultural groups.

Studies in the Malaysian context have also pointed to the relationship between language learning strategies and language performance. A study by Mohamed Amin Embi *et al.* (2001) indicated a significant positive relationship between language learning strategies use and language performance. The high achievers reported greater strategy use than the low achievers (less successful learners).

Relationships between language learning strategies and motivation levels have also been revealed in Kamarul Shukri *et al.* (2009) in that language learners with higher levels of motivation poses a richer repertoire of strategies and employ them more frequently compared to less motivated language learners. Their study showed that there was significant gender difference in language learning strategies as females have a higher tendency to use overall language learning strategies than males. Significant difference between genders also surfaced in the use of affective and metacognitive strategies with females using the language learning strategies more often males.

Language learning strategies are considered as indicators of how good language learners deal with the problems they encounter in the language learning process. It is hoped that this study will not only give English teachers valuable information on how their students process information, but also what plans and strategies students select that have not been appropriately used. This will enable teachers to help their students become better language learners by guiding and training them in using the appropriate strategies.

Studies on strategy research have shown the usefulness and importance of learning strategies for ESL and EFL learners. Learning strategies could be equally important for learners of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) who may be taking EAP and EOP courses. However, research on these groups of learners has not been undertaken much. There is also a need to investigate strategy use among students in different disciplines as different disciplines may affect choice of strategies.

The purpose of the research was to investigate the patterns of language learning strategies as reported by the students according to gender, courses, and their undergraduate programmes. In particular the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ-1: What learning strategies emerge from responses to Oxford's (Oxford, 1990a) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)?

RQ-2 Are there differences in learning strategies between male and female students?

RQ-3: Are differences in learning strategies, if any, explained by students pursuing the different English courses?

RQ-4: Are there differences in learning strategies between students pursuing the different degree programmes?

Methodology

Participants

This study focuses mainly on Malay-speaking undergraduate students at the International Islamic University Malaysia. International students do not normally matriculate at the University; instead enroll directly into first year. However, those who lack English proficiency assessed by the University's own English test, IELTS, or TOEFL, are required to study remedial English courses until they meet the language requirements of the programme they applied for.

There were 312 participants in this study, most of whom spoke Malay as their native language and who were undergraduates from the faculties of Economics and Management, Human Sciences, Engineering, Law and Architecture from the International Islamic University Malaysia. Their ages ranged from 21 to 26.

Instruments

The present study replicated the language learning strategies of Oxford's (Oxford, 1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The instrument specifies six learning strategies represented by a number of statements under each, and corresponding Likert-like scale between 1 and 5. Scale 1 represents "Never or almost never true of me," 2 "Usually not true of me," 3 "Somewhat true of me", 4 "Usually true of me" and 5 "Always or almost always true of me." Learning styles 1 comprises 9 items; 2, 14 items; 3, 6 items; 4, 9 items; 5, 6 items; and 6, 6 items. The score for each item under a learning strategy is added up and average obtained. The higher the average score, the higher the propensity of the strategy being used by the respondents.

There are two versions of SILL: one for native speakers of English and the other for learners of English as a second or foreign language. The second version was the one used for this study. This version of SILL has 50 items which are all common strategies used by learners. These items are divided into direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are further divided into Memory strategies (9 items: items 1 through 9), Cognitive strategies (14 items: items 10 through 23), and Compensation strategies (6 items: items 24 through 29). The indirect strategies are divided into Metacognitive strategies (9 items: items 30 through 38), Affective strategies (6 items: items 39 through 44), and Social strategies (6 items: items 45 through 50). The dominant characteristics of each of the strategy types are shown below:

- Memory strategies are used for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it when needed for communication.
- Cognitive strategies are used for linking new information with existing schemata and for analyzing and classifying it.

- Compensation strategies include such strategies as guessing and using gestures. Such strategies are needed to fill any gaps in the knowledge of the language.
- Metacognitive strategies are techniques used for organizing, planning, focusing and evaluating one's own learning.
- Affective strategies are used for handling feelings, attitudes and motivations.
- Social strategies (6 items) are used for facilitating interaction by asking questions, and cooperating with others in the learning process

Oxford (1990) suggests the following minimum and maximum ranges for high, medium and low strategy users:

High strategy users	3.5 to 5
Medium strategy users	2.5 to 3.4
Low strategy users	1.0 to 2.4

This study also made use of a modified version of the background questionnaire of Oxford. Studies by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) and Oxford (1996) have produced high Cronbach alpha indexes (between 0.91 and 0.94) in studies across different cultures. SILL has also been validated in many studies (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The index of Cronbach alpha obtained for this study was .914. SILL has also proven to have concurrent and predictive validity when the results of SILL are related to variables such as proficiency, motivation and learning styles (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995 and Oxford, 1996).

The instrument was administered through the instructors of a few sections of two different English courses, specifically English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) which are required university courses. The EAP course is a learner-centred course designed for learners to conduct library research in order to produce an argumentative faculty-related research paper. Learners experience a step-by-step approach in writing an academic research paper. The EOP course, on the other hand, is designed to equip students of Economics, Engineering, Architecture, and Information and Communication Technology with the necessary English language skills that they will require for future occupational purposes. Students will participate in an extended work-related simulation while receiving the necessary skills-based training to enable them to fulfill the various spoken and written communication required.

Findings

Female respondents outnumbered their male counterpart (72.8% vs. 27.2%). English and Engineering majors (40.1%) dominated the sample, and together with Human science, law and architectural students comprised 91.7% of the respondents. This sub-total burgeoned to 98.7% when accounting, business, and economics respondents are also included. Other majors made up the rest (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographics (N= 312)

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	86	27.6
Female	226	72.4
Total	313	100.0
Major		
English	124	39.7
Engineering	80	25.6
Human science, Law, Architecture	81	26.0
Accounting, Business, and	22	7.2

Economics		
Others	5	1.5
Total	314	100.0
Course		
EOP: LE4600	139	44.5
EOP: LE4100	51	16.4
EAP: LE4000	122	40.1
Total	312	100.0

Malaysians made up 95.8% of the respondents, and generally spoke their mother tongue Malay at home (95.5%). Among Malaysian respondents 69.1% spoke mainly Malay, whereas 30.9% conversed in both Malay and English at home. All of the respondents consider English proficiency as important (14.4%) and very important (85.6%). Almost all respondents (97.4%) enjoy learning English. Only the minority said their oral (4.5%) and writing (5.2%) proficiency is poor. It is also the minority who said that their oral and writing proficiencies are excellent, i.e. 5.5% and 4.9% respectively.

Chi-square test produces no significant relationship between gender and learning strategies. However, results show that languages spoken at home are significantly related to learning strategies (Pearson Chi-Square 18.513, df 5, $p = .002$).

RQ-1 Pattern of learning strategies

The pattern of learning strategies is identified based on grand means (see Table 2, column 4). These learning strategies are Social, Compensation, Cognitive, Affective, Metacognitive, and Memory. Grand means range from 3.15 to 3.82. Memory learning strategy is the lowest (3.15), whereas Social learning strategy is the highest (3.82). Results show student sample preferred learning strategies in the following order: Social, Compensation, Cognitive, Affective, Metacognitive, and Memory. One can easily observe that Social, Compensation, and Cognitive, obtained higher means which commensurate with matching frequencies. These learning strategies are subscribed by many students, thus carrying more meaningful means compared to Affective and Metacognitive, for instance, with only five and seven responses, respectively.

Table 2: Ranking of Learning Strategies

Learning Strategy Category	Rank	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social	1st	121	3.82	.579
Compensation	2nd	80	3.60	.599
Cognitive	3rd	31	3.56	.496
Affective	4th	5	3.53	.653
Metacognitive	5th	7	3.20	.605
Memory	6th	22	3.15	.685

RQ-2 Learning strategies and gender

Statistical results reveal that there was no overall significant relationship between gender and learning strategies. However, when t-test was applied on the survey data, results show that gender provides a good explanation for

different learning strategies preferred by male and female students. These marked differences emerge for learning strategies - Social ($p=.021$), Memory ($p=.000$), and Affective ($p=.003$). Male and female students exhibit varying levels of each of the three learning strategies. For Social, male use of the strategy is lower (3.70) than that of female (3.87). Male students' preference for Memory is much lower (2.89) compared to their female counterparts (3.25). For Affective, male also show lower rating of 3.35 vs. 3.59 (female).

Table 3: T-test results of Learning Strategies by Gender

Learning strategy	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Significance
Metacognitive	Male	86	3.11	.658	.071	NS
	Female	226	3.24	.582	.039	NS
Cognitive	Male	86	3.48	.513	.055	NS
	Female	226	3.60	.487	.032	NS
Compensation	Male	86	3.55	.653	.070	NS
	Female	226	3.62	.578	.038	NS
Social	Male	86	3.70	.604	.065	$p=.021$
	Female	226	3.87	.564	.038	$p=.021$
Memory	Male	86	2.89	.685	.074	$p=.000$
	Female	226	3.25	.660	.044	$p=.000$
Affective	Male	86	3.35	.710	.077	$p=.003$
	Female	226	3.59	.618	.041	$p=.003$

NS = Not significant.

RQ-3 Learning strategies and courses

There were 44.6% of the students studying LE4600, 16.3% studying LE4100, and 39.1% studying LE4000. ANOVA results show that students pursuing these courses adopted different learning strategies.

Table 4: ANOVA Learning Strategies between English Courses

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	468.524	2	234.262	939.184	.000
Within Groups	70.340	282	.249		
Total	538.863	284			

N=312

In order to find out the intensity of usage of various learning strategies by students in the three courses, the strategies were ranked according to grand means, and produced the resulting Table 5. All learning strategies (5 out of 6) ranked first in LE4600, second in LE4600 (5 out of 6), and third in LE4100 (n=5 out of 6).

Table 5: Ranking of Learning Strategies in Three English Courses

English courses	Metacognitive	Cognitive	Compensation	Social	Memory	Affective
LE4600 (EOP for Econs & Mngmt) N=139	2	2	3	2	2	2
LE4100 (EOP for Engin) N=51	3	3	1	3	3	3
LE4000 (English for Academic Purposes for all students) N=122	1	1	2	1	1	1

RQ-4 Learning strategies and degree programs

Learning strategies adopted by students were also reflected by their affiliation to respective degree programs. Three student groups belong to English, Engineering and KENMS faculties, respectively. ANOVA results (see Table 6) reveal significant differences for five out of six learning strategies with the exception of the compensation strategy. P-values for the statistical significance vary from .005 to .000. This means that despite using the six available learning strategies, students in each degree program applies varying levels of intensity of usage.

**Table 6: ANOVA Learning Strategies by Majors
(English, Engineering and KENMS majors)**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Metacognitive	Between Groups	4.919	2	2.459	6.952	.001
	Within Groups	99.761	282	.354		
	Total	104.680	284			
Cognitive	Between Groups	3.947	2	1.973	8.410	.000
	Within Groups	66.173	282	.235		
	Total	70.120	284			
Compensatory	Between Groups	.146	2	.073	.199	.819
	Within	103.382	282	.367		

	Groups					
	Total	103.528	284			
Social	Between Groups	9.985	2	4.993	16.165	.000
	Within Groups	87.097	282	.309		
	Total	97.083	284			
Memory	Between Groups	5.019	2	2.509	5.458	.005
	Within Groups	129.656	282	.460		
	Total	134.675	284			
Affective	Between Groups	9.578	2	4.789	12.222	.000
	Within Groups	110.494	282	.392		
	Total	120.072	284			

Discussion

Learning strategies preferred by the sample in this study did not reflect exactly those exhibited by the sample used by Abdolmehdi Riazi (2007), for instance. In this study, the sample showed this ranking: Social, compensation, cognitive, affective, metacognitive and memory, whereas Abdolmehdi Riazi's study (2007) revealed this pattern: metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies than social, affective, and memory strategies.

The spread (i.e. minimum-maximum ranges) in our survey data was too broad (e.g. 1.89-5.00, the statistics are not included in the paper) that we could not classify the results meaningfully into high, medium and low strategy users as recommended by Oxford (1990).

Results do generally support that female students tend to use higher level of the learning strategies compared to their male counterpart. The means shown by females were higher than those by male students for all learning strategies except for memory strategy (Table 3). This study establishes support for the findings of Noguchi (1991); Green (1992); Oxford, (1993) and Green & Oxford (1993) and Kamarul Shukri *et al.* (2009). It is also interesting to note that Kamarul Shukri *et al.*'s (2009) study, unlike the other studies cited on English Language learning, looked at the relationship between gender and the strategies used in learning Arabic.

The results also show that learning strategies are associated with English courses studied, namely, LE 4000, LE 4100 and LE 4600. Students used principally all of the learning strategies in descending order of priority (see Table

5) for LE4000, followed by LE4600 and lastly, LE4100. As mentioned previously, LE 4600 and LE 4100 are courses taken by students from the faculties of Economics and Management Sciences, and Engineering respectively. However, LE 4000 is a required course for students from all the faculties in the university. Therefore, it is not surprising that the course (i.e. LE 4000) tops the list in the array of strategies used by the students as this course comprises students from all the faculties.

It is interesting to note that students in the sample confirmed that their adoption of learning strategies seemed to be shaped by the curriculum of their respective degree programs, except for the compensation strategy. If the three degree programs may be placed on a continuum of verbal and non-verbal, the English majors may be placed at the extreme left, Economics (not KENMS) in the middle, and Engineering at the other extreme.

Conclusion

Findings of this study indicate that students from the three different degree programmes differed in the use of the six learning strategies. Next, gender appears to be important for social, memory and affective learning strategies. Thirdly, learning strategies also appear to be related to the three English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, namely, English for Academic Purposes for all students, English for Occupational Purposes for Economics and Management Science students and English for Occupational Purposes for Engineering students. The relationship found between the learning strategies and the ESP courses could very well be due to the different demands of the three courses. It can also be concluded that the degree programmes, to a certain extent, tend to shape the learning strategies of the respective students.

One of the pedagogical implications that can be drawn from the findings of this study is that instructors have a role in exposing students to a variety of strategies thereby giving students the opportunities to choose strategies that best suits their learning objectives and learning styles. In addition to facilitating learning through the various strategies in the classroom teachers can also incorporate the use of strategies in the materials and the classroom activities. The teachers can guide the students in the systematic use of strategies which will enable them to learn language more effectively.

The findings of this study also showed that not all students are familiar with the repertoire of strategies that are available at their disposal. Therefore the instructors' role in familiarizing them with the strategies becomes paramount. This calls for the importance of some kind of strategy training in the context of the EFL/ESL syllabus. Another important implication of the study is that instructors should be well aware of the

The study was limited to only three degree programmes. It did not include other programmes whose students might have exhibited learning strategies different from those shown by the subjects of this study. In addition to questionnaires future research could include interviews which could furnish us with more in-depth information. Personal interviews could also give further insights into similarities of strategies of both gender.

The study also could not incorporate levels of motivation of language learners using objective test scores because not many students revealed their achievement. We therefore could not make a comparison of the results of our study to that of Mohamed Amin Embi *et al.* (2001), and to some extent, Abdolmehri Riazi (2007).

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Brown (1994) and Chamot and Kupper (1989) related communication to LLSs by including receptive strategies which deal with receiving the message and productive strategies.