Language Learning Strategies Among Saudi EFL Students

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Abstract
This study aims to examine language learning strategies as important factors that affect students' learning. The study sample consists of 34 male students in Royal Guard Secondary School in Riyadh city. In order to examine the English language learning strategy, use among Saudi secondary-school EFL students, they provided their responses to Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford 1990, Version 7.0). The results showed that the students used direct strategies more than indirect strategies. The most frequently used strategies among students were compensation strategies, whereas the least frequently used strategies were social strategies. In addition, the study results show that the general pattern of language learning strategy used by the students includes compensation, affective, metacognitive, cognitive, memory, and finally social strategy. It can be concluded that teachers in secondary-schools are recommended to pay due attention to the use of language learning strategies among students and support them in employing the strategies that are beneficial for them based on the differences and styles. This can help teachers greatly in achieving satisfactory teaching results.
Keywords: Learning Strategies, Memory Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, Compensation Strategies, Metacognitive Strategies, Affective Strategies, Social Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies (LLS) consider as crucial factors in students' learning due to their importance to instructors and educators. O' Malley et al. (1985) view language learning strategies as skills that are acquired as declarative knowledge to gain and store new knowledge. These strategies are behaviors, steps, or techniques that language learners apply to facilitate language learning, which "make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 2003, p.274).

Research in LLS explained that learners' conception should be employed in learning and managing the relayed process for more improvement to ensure a rich learning achievement (Griffiths and Parr, 2001). Ellis (1994) adds that individual learner differences and situational variables specify the learner's choice of learning strategies. On the other hand, learning strategies, in turn, influence two aspects of learning: the rate of acquisition and the definitive level of achievement. However, the learners' level of L2 proficiency and their language performance can also affect the choice of strategies.

Therefore, learning strategies vary from simple tasks to more complex tasks based on the learners; they were divided into several categories (Ellis, 2012). Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies, which is the most comprehensive classification divided these strategies into two direct and indirect categories (The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning-SILL). While direct strategies consist of memory, cognitive, and compensation, indirect strategies consist of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Ellis, 2012).

Many studies on language learning strategies have been conducted. However, few studies have focused on Saudi EFL learners in secondary schools. Therefore, it is important to understand why some EFL Saudi students acquire English faster than others. In the current study, the researcher examines language learning strategies among Saudi EFL students in Riyadh city.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As mentioned earlier, the present study aims to investigate the use of language learning strategies for the Saudi EFL students to determine the usage level of each strategy in general and regarding its category in particular. As the use of strategies may be affected by individual differences and personal preferences, the study further examines whether the students have problems with using certain strategy categories. As such, to fulfill the purpose of the study, the following questions need to be answered:
1. What is the general pattern of language learning strategies among Saudi EFL secondary-school students?
2. What is the most and least used language learning strategy among Saudi EFL secondary-school students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

McMullen (2009) investigated language learning strategy use of 165 male and female Saudi EFL students in three universities in Saudi Arabia. The findings showed overall strategy use of both groups fell within medium range. The results showed that gender and academic major did not have any statistically significant effect on the use of LLS among Saudi EFL students. The results also demonstrated that Saudi EFL students as a whole

favored three strategies (social, metacognitive, and compensation) but neglected three others (cognitive, memory, and affective). The results also indicated that female students used slightly more LLS than male students.

Moreover, there are a lot of studies on learners' strategies styles. Wong and Nunan (2011) present the results of a comparative investigation into the learning styles and strategies of effective and ineffective language learners. The participants were one hundred and ten undergraduate university students in Hong Kong. The study revealed key differences in learning strategy preferences, learning styles and patterns of language use.

Javid, Al-thubaiti, and Uthman (2013) investigated LLS used by Saudi English-major undergraduates by using SILL version 7. Paired Samples t-test was applied to see if significant differences exist because of their GPA differences. The informants of this study were 240 English-major undergraduates (low GPA, 106 & high GPA, 134) enrolled at foreign languages department Taif University. Results reported that the participants with high English language proficiency use language learning strategies more frequently. The participants ranked the metacognitive strategies the highest as compared to other LLS followed by social and cognitive LLS respectively. Among the remaining three categories of LLS, compensation and affective strategies showed mixed preferences, but both sample groups assigned memory strategies the least mean values. Considering the fact that frequency of LLS usage and English language proficiency are positively linked to each other, it is concluded that it seems necessary to teach language learning strategies explicitly. As such, even the weaker students should be able to enhance English language proficiency by exploiting a wide range of suitable strategies that are appropriate to different classroom activities and learners' L2 experience.

Hussain, Javed, and Munshi (2015) examined the reading strategies used by adult learners' to read materials in the English language for their studies. The population of the study consisted of students of Universiti Sains Malaysia. A sample of 80 (40 Postgraduates and 40 Undergraduates) TESOL students enrolled in the University were selected randomly. The data were collected by administering a piloted questionnaire and analyzed through SPSS. The results of the study revealed that TESOL students used different strategies in reading textual materials. The main reading strategies appeared to be adjusting reading speed; focusing on typographical features; summarizing; re-reading the text; taking notes; reviewing the text; underlining or circling important information; using tables, figures, pictures and contextual clues, and guessing the meaning of unknown words and/ or phrases. The study further demonstrated that in spite of using the mentioned reading strategies; the learners need to know how to use dictionaries, pauses, visualization and critical evaluation of the text. Based on the findings of the study, preparation of proper guidelines and their effective use by TESOL students, teachers and researchers to enhance reading comprehension were recommended.

Altmisdort (2016) conducted a study is to evaluate learning and acquisition strategies used by L2 learners. This study is a comparative investigation of learning and acquisition strategies of successful and less successful language learners. The main question of the study is to investigate the relationship between the learners' strategies and their success; why some learners become less successful in language learning while others become more successful. Although there are many different answers to this question, in the study, "the strategy" that the learners used has been scrutinized. The study assessed the language learning strategies used by 92 university students in Turkey. Also, one hundred and twenty university students in Turkey participated in an interview. They were grouped in into two parts as "successful" and "less successful" learners. Results reveal that there is a big gap between the students who use learning strategies and the ones who use acquisition strategies. The findings show that the language learners have different language learning strategies and these strategies can be grouped into learning and acquisition strategies. These findings have important implications for teachers, instructors, and program designers to develop and practice different language strategies in order to have more successful students.

Wu and Lin (2016) utilized the Oxford's (1990) SILL and an English writing anxiety scale to examine the relationship between learning strategies and English writing anxiety in 102 university-level English language learners (ELLs) with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) in a university in Taiwan. Kruskal Wallis Test results revealed no significant association between learning strategies and English writing anxiety. The common learning strategies utilized by participants were compensation, social, memory, and mixed strategies. The interview data indicated that ELLs suffered considerably from writing anxiety. Coping strategies of the highly anxious ELL of each learning strategy group is also reported.

Over the years, many researchers have studied and examined the language learning strategies. However, the results of the studies are different and controversial. Most of the research participants in these studies are students in different colleges and universities. There is little in the literature that focuses on the language learning strategies of Saudi secondary-school EFL students. To provide more evidence for the research of language learning strategies, this study aims to examine the language learning strategy use among Saudi secondary-school EFL students

METHODOLOGY
- **Research Procedure**

Due to the study nature, the quantitative approach was adopted. Therefore, a questionnaire instrument was designed to cover two sections. First, the participants' background information, such as name, class, sex, English proficiency, evaluation of English's importance, the reason for learning English, etc. The second section included 48 statements subdivided into six categories; Memory Strategies (A1-A9), Cognitive Strategies (B10-B21), Compensation Strategies (C22-C27), Metacognitive Strategies (D28-D36), Affective Strategies (E37-E42) and Social Strategies (F43-F48). Each statement was given a five-point ascending scale (Likert Scale).

- **Study Sample**

This study focused on the First-year EFL students at secondary schools in Riyadh who were the population of the study. The study sample consisted of 34 male students in Royal Guard Secondary School in Riyadh city. These students are taken from one class enrolled in the second semester of the 1437-1438 academic year.

- **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data were collected by the Oxford's SILL (Oxford 1990, Version 7.0) which considers the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies' that has been used widely in similar studies (Ellis, 1994; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006). Moreover, The SILL was administrated to the students in their classroom where 34 participants were informed of the purpose of the SILL. The time of one class period was sufficient for all the students to complete the SILL items. These items were then manipulated through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22, to measure the learning strategy use. Descriptive statistics provided the means and standard deviations (SD) to analyze the participants' general pattern of language learning strategy use and the strategies frequently used and less frequently used.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION
- **General Analysis**

Through calculating the mean and standard deviation of the six SILL categories, the researcher reached the general pattern of language learning strategy use. Following Oxford's SILL, the researcher calculated the descriptive statistics of the direct and indirect strategy groups. The study results are presented in the table (1) which first showed that the students used direct strategies more than indirect strategies. Moreover, since the Oxford's (1990) division of language learning strategy use (high usage is from 3.5 to 5.0; medium usage is from 2.5 to 3.4, and low usage is from 1.0 to 2.4), the participants used learning strategies at a medium level; their total mean 2.65.

In addition, the findings indicated that students were medium users of language learning strategies. It could also be seen that, among the six categories, Saudi secondary-school students used compensation strategies most frequently and social strategies least frequently. Accordingly, the general pattern of language learning strategy use by these students is compensation, affective, metacognitive, cognitive, memory and social.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for all the learning strategy categories

Category	Mean	SD
Memory	2.45	0.49
Cognitive	2.51	0.71
Compensation	3.06	0.47
Metacognitive	2.84	0.62
Affective	2.87	0.69
Social	2.18	0.53
Direct	2.90	0.58
Indirect	2.46	0.74
Total	2.65	0.60

- **Detailed Analysis**

As the study investigated each category, the results answered the research questions as the following:

- **Research question 1: What is the general pattern of language learning strategies among Saudi EFL secondary-school students?**
    - *A) Memory Strategies*

Results showed in the table (2) that the students prefer linking what they are learning and what they have learned before. They do not prefer using flashcards to remember new words.

Table 2: Memory strategies used by the students

Strategy	Mean	SD
I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	3.88	1.01
I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	3.40	1.23
remember the new words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	3.10	1.55
I use new English words in a sentence so that I can remember them.	2.89	1.26
I connect the sound of an English word and an image or picture of the world to help me remember the word.	2.77	1.11
I review English lessons often.	2.68	1.37
I physically act out new English words.	2.43	1.09

B) *Cognitive Strategies*

In the table (3), the most frequently used cognitive strategy is saying or writing new English words several times. The least frequently used one is "I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English." The reason is that those students writing proficiency is too low and they are not able to create a written discourse.

Table3: Cognitive strategies used by the students

Strategy	Mean	SD
I say or write new English words several times.	3.84	1.23
I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	3.45	1.31
I try to find patterns in English.	3.25	1.24
I try to talk like native English speakers.	3.05	1.20
I look for words in my language that are similar to new words in English.	3.03	1.28
I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	3.00	1.33
I try not to translate word-for-word.	3.00	1.19
I use the English word I know in different ways.	2.84	1.22
I first skim an English passage (read the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	2.85	1.46
I practice the sounds of English.	2.65	1.31
I read for pleasure in English.	2.65	1.34

C) *Compensation Strategies*

As table (4) elaborated, the least frequently used strategy is to read English and understand it by guessing, without looking up every new word, which highlights the effect of the input mode on the use of strategies. This may be explained by the fact that when students see a film or listen to a song or a speaker, they make guesses to follow them. It seems that when students get oral input, they use guessing strategies whereas when they get written input, they need to refer to a dictionary.

It is also possible that when the students watch a film, they use contextual clues, actions, and movements to guess the meaning whereas they do not have such an opportunity while they are reading. Also, they may not want to intervene the conversation, or they may not have the chance to stop the speaker or a film to look up the unknown words in a dictionary. However, they can stop reading, refer to a dictionary and then go on reading when they are involved in a reading activity.

Table 4: Compensation strategies used by the students

Strategy	Mean	SD
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses	3.54	1.11
I try to guess what the other person will say next in English	3.23	1.17
I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English	3.23	1.42
I use gestures when I can't think of a word during a conversation in English.	3.18	1.32
If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing	3.10	1.24
I read English without looking up every new word	2.21	1.19

D) *Metacognitive Strategies*

According to the table (5), the most frequently used metacognitive strategy is paying attention when someone is speaking English. The least used strategy is to look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English. This may be interpreted by the fact that the students' vocabulary knowledge is weak, and they do not consider reading as a fun activity. As seen in the compensation strategies category, least frequently used compensation strategy is to read English without looking up every new word. This is because students feel the need to look up the unknown words in a dictionary and they cannot deal with the unknown words since most words and the structures are unknown to them.

Table 5: Metacognitive strategies used by the students

Strategy	Mean	SD
I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better	3.42	1.29
I think about my progress in learning English	3.29	1.27
I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English	2.99	1.21
I have clear goals for improving my English skills	2.93	1.20
I look for people I can talk to in English	2.83	1.29
I plan my schedule, so I have enough time to study English	2.59	1.12
I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English	2.51	1.18

E) Affective Strategies

The most frequently used strategy is "I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English" (see table (6)). The least frequently used strategy is "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary." The similar finding regarding diary keeping was also found in Altunay's (2013) study which was carried out with another group of EFL students.

Table 6: Affective strategies used by the students

Strategy	Mean	SD
I reward myself or treat when I do well in English	2.65	1.38
I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake	2.52	1.34
I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying English	2.48	1.42
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English	2.13	1.34
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English	2.13	1.34
I write down my feelings in a language learning diary	1.67	1.08

F) Social Strategies

From table (7), it seems that keeping a diary is not a frequently done activity because the students' writing proficiency is low, and also, they do not want to share their feelings even in a diary because they do not want other people to find and read them. The most frequently used strategies in this category are "If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again" and "I try to learn about the culture of English speakers". "I practice my English with other students" is the least frequently used strategy.

Table 7: Social strategies used by the students

Strategy	Mean	SD
If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again	3.30	1,31
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers	3.30	1.39
I ask questions in English	3.24	1.34
I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk	3.11	1,43
I ask for help from English speakers	3.03	1.34
I practice my English with other students	2.60	1,29

- **Research question 2: What are the most and least used language learning strategy among Saudi EFL secondary-school students?**

Results of the table (8) show that the students use the language learning strategies more frequently than the other strategy categories; affective strategies. While White (1993) states that students might be expected to make wider and more frequent use of affective strategies to cope with the tension and concerns which stem from their isolated context, the current study presents a different result. Moreover, the results emphasize the findings of Dulger's (2012) study that affective strategies are the least frequently used strategies by students from different nationalities, which was also carried out with Saudi EFL students.

However, Krashen (1982) stated that students need a low affective filter to process the input. In other words, learning occurs in a relaxed environment; therefore, language students need to be aware of the affective strategies to use them when they feel tension while learning a second language. Furthermore, the rare use of the affective strategies could be due to the students' feelings that using them is not necessary if affective problems do not occur. Another reason that students might suffer from tension or anxiety without using affective strategies is the unawareness e of those strategies.

Table 8: The most and least used language learning strategy among Saudi EFL secondary-school students

Strategy	Mean
Metacognitive Strategies	3.13
Compensation Strategies	3.13
Social Strategies	3.05
Cognitive Strategies	2.85
Memory Strategies	2.74
Affective Strategies	2.32

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed the general usage pattern of language learning strategies by Saudi secondary-school EFL students who showed more use of the compensation strategies rather than the social strategies. The findings highlighted that according to the teachers' and the students' academic performance, the language learning process could be enhanced using learning strategies. Therefore, teachers in secondary schools should adopt the use of these varied strategies in teaching and train the students to improve their different abilities. Also, it has been confirmed that combining instruction strategy with the teaching content could be the only method for achieving suitable teaching results.

The results of the study indicated that secondary-school students in Saudi Arabia use English language learning strategies at a medium level which oppose the other studies findings of the relation between strategy utilization and students' performance. Moreover, since O' Malley and Chamot (1990) indicated that most students could benefit from learning strategies, teachers should increase students' awareness of using and combining the learning strategies to help students improve their EFL performance or proficiency.

The study also reveals that although social strategies have a significant correlation with EFL performance and consider an important part of learning process, the secondary-school students rarely use these strategies. Therefore, teachers should create EFL learning atmosphere to give students more chances to take part in some social activities and cultivate their communicative abilities by proper training of social strategies.

Furthermore, the findings resulted in the students' ability to focus their attention, take notes frequently, deduce the language rules and have clear goals for learning English. Consequently, teachers should increase the students' awareness of the importance of using the language learning strategies, and encourage them to practice these strategies to improve their English learning results. Therefore, for facilitating the EFL learning, teachers need to increase the students' interest and relaxed brain by instructing by implementing useful strategies for their learning. Learning strategies can also enhance the students' ability to promote their achievement in language proficiency as other studies implied (Green and Oxford, 1995; O' Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1990).

Teaching students the suitable language learning strategies have proved its ability to improve learning efficiency and autonomy in language learning since learning strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviors that learners use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (Holec, 1981; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p.1). Therefore, teachers need first to have the suitable knowledge about the language learning strategies, the students' learning needs and the learning resources available in their schools. They should also provide direct instructions to cultivate students' ability in using strategies. Finally, teachers should consider strategy training as an integral part of regular class routine more than a supplementary activity.

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