Language learning strategies in an ESP context: A study of political sciences students

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring the relationship between English proficiency and language learning strategies of political sciences students. A cloze test and an Arabic version of Oxford's SILL used to collect relevant data form students of political sciences at Kuwait University. The results showed that (a) the most frequently strategies used were the metacognitive strategies while the affective strategies were the least used ones; and (b) English proficiency was highly correlated with metacognitive strategies while it was lowly correlated with memory. Based on the obtained results, the study concluded with relevant conclusions and recommendations concerning the use language learning strategies in ESP for political sciences contexts.

Keywords: ESP, language learning strategies, English proficiency, political sciences students, Oxford's SILL.

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Introduction

For the last three decades, there has been a growing interest in the learner-centered approaches in the areas of second/foreign language learning. This shift was brought about by the developments taking place in other fields of education, particularly in the areas of cognitive psychology and education, which were concerned with exploring how people think and reason. Language learning strategies, which are generally defined as the behaviors and thoughts that learners use to select, organize, and integrate new knowledge is an important variable that has received much attention in the field of language learning and teaching (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; Wenden, 1987) In effect, this line of research has led to numerous studies investigating individual language learning strategies (LLS) and their relationship to proficiency in second/foreign languages, either while learning a given language or while using it, or while doing both (Cohen, 1998; Conti, 2004; Macaro, 2006; Nakatani, 2005).

An important feature that makes the theme of language learning strategies so popular among researchers and practitioners is the fact that strategies represent concepts and processes that can be taught and learnt (Cohen, 1998; Hsaio & Oxford, 2002; Nyikos, 1989; Wenden, 1987). Because strategies are defined as "techniques or steps that students use to improve the internalization, storage, retrieval or use of the new language" (Oxford, 1992, p. 18), Oxford (1990) believed that they can make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. On the same line, Chamot (2005) defines strategies, though broadly, as procedures facilitating a learning task. Based on this perspective of language learning strategies, some essential features can be concluded: (a) strategies play a major role in the process of learning a language as they promote and facilitate language learning; (b) language learning is a complex process and strategies themselves are problem-solving techniques used to cope with this process; and (c) strategies are flexible as they can be learned and taught and learners can be trained in their management (Martinez, 1996).

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In fact, the advocates of language learning strategies do not consider other individual variables such as personality and gender to be as crucial to language learning as learning strategies. This is because learners can both adopt and adapt these strategies in many contexts, both inside and outside the classroom. In other words, learners are believed to exercise control over their own learning process and thus increase their autonomy (Brown, Campione & Day, 1980; Rubin, 1981). The optimal output expected here is that of improving language proficiency.

Literature Review

There is a growing literature on the relationship between proficiency and language learning strategies. Research indicated four important observations: (a) conscious use of appropriate learning strategies typifies good language learners (Vasantha, 2007); (b) skilled language learners select strategies that work well together and that are tailored to the requirements of the learning task (Richards & Renandya, 2005); (c) progress in language learning was correlated with high frequency of broad language learning strategies (e.g., Griffiths, 2003; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Park, 1997; Wharton, 2000); and (d) certain individual language learning strategies affect language proficiency (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995; Lan & Oxford, 2003). These patterns of results, which varied from one study to another, could be traced to two reasons: how the progress was conceptualized and how proficiency was identified (e.g., Alqahtani, 2007; Park, 1997; Wharton, 2000). Moreover, the methodology used by researchers has affected the nature of studies conducted and consequently, the results obtained as well. Although the mainstream research methodology has been quantitative in nature, educators could still get a gestalt of language learning strategies.

Previous research in this field has yielded a body of evidence to the fact that language learning strategies revolve around four aspects (for elaboration see, Conti, 2004; Macaro, 2006; Nakatani, 2005) discussed as follows: First successful language learning is correlated either with macro level language learning strategies or with micro level (i.e., certain) language learning strategies. Second, language learning strategies are influenced by learners' individual differences such as gender,experience, or cultural background. Third, the methodology used by researchers has affected the

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nature of studies conducted and consequently the results obtained. Although the mainstream research methodology has been quantitative in nature, educators could obtain a gestalt of language learning strategies. Fourth, if requirements of good training are taken into consideration, language learning strategies could be found to promote successful language learning..

Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) makee the following observation regarding previous research related to language learning strategies:

> The consensus of the research is that although all learners, regardless of success with language learning, consciously or unconsciously employ a variety of learning strategies; successful language learners engage in more purposeful language learning and use more language-learning strategies than do less successful ones. Overall, findings indicate that both the frequency with which learners apply language learning strategies and the strategies they choose are distinguishing characteristics between more successful and less successful learners (p. 400).

Statement of the Problem

Previous research showed that English for Specific purposes (ESP) constituted an independent field in the context of general language learning. Owing to their virtue of unique content, style and delivery, ESP courses require the usage of different strategies when compared to those used in general language learning situations (Alqahtani, 2007). Therefore, this study aims at (a) investigating the overall language learning strategy use of English learners enrolled in an ESP course in Political Science; and (b) exploring the correlation between English proficiency and the language learning strategies used.

Limitation of the study

This study relies on two factors that may limit the accuracy of information received: (a) the memory of the participants; and (b) the degree of the participant self-biasness. Therefore, the respondents were reminded that their honesty is very significant for the success of the study and there were told that there are no wrong or right answers, just personal opinions. Furthermore, the generalization of the findings should be treated carefully.

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Methodology

Sample

The participants were drawn from a group of students from a political science course at Kuwait University (2008/2009 spring). The sample constituted fifty undergraduate students, out of which 25 were males and the other 25 were female students.

Instrument

Various researchers have attempted to classify language learning strategies into taxonomies within the contexts of the different definitions given by them (Hsaio & Oxford, 2002). Oxford (1994) cited 24 language learning strategies taxonomies derived by different researchers, each of which tend to reflect the different situations of the learners within which the researchers made their observations (for these taxonomies, see e.g., O'Malley et al., 1985a; Politzer, 1983; Rubin, 1981; Wenden, 1991). The classification criteria were diverse, but they generally included the contexts, functions, and directness. However, the taxonomy proposed by Oxford (1990) is believed to be a comprehensive taxonomy for the following reasons: (a) it made a quite a significant contribution to the field; (d) it was built on the notions embodied in models prior to hers; and (c) these strategies described were by no means discrete and the strategy groups overlapped each other to a great extent. Rebecca Oxford offers a comprehensive definition of   language learning strategies as follows: "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information…; specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8).

The original SILL consists of 50 strategy statements which are subdivided into six strategy categories. These six categories are (Oxford, 1989b): memory (for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it when needed), cognitive (involve conscious ways of tackling learning, such as note-taking, resourcing, and elaboration), compensation (for reducing or overcoming one's own deficiencies by using other possible alternatives such as guessing or using gestures), metacognitive (involve planning and thinking about learning, such as planning one's learning,

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monitoring one's own speech or writing, and evaluating how well one has done),
affective (for handling emotions or attitudes), and social (for co-operation with others
in the learning process). According to Oxford, the former three strategies are direct
whereas the latter three are indirect.

The instrument used in this study was original Oxford's (1990) ESL/EFL of
the SILL (version 7.0), a self-report questionnaire used to assess the frequency of use
of language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). The main reason for choosing this
inventory over other inventories was the recognition it received from extensive studies
in different contexts (Macaro, 2006), which further testifies its reliability and validity.
The SILL uses five Likert-type responses for each strategy item ranging from 1 to 5
(i.e., from 'never or almost never true of me' to 'always true of me'). A sample
strategy description to which the learners were required to respond is as follows: "I
use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them."

Oxford's classification has been widely used by researchers since the early
1990s in the fields of language learning and teaching. However, with the shift in focus
from curriculum-centered approach to learner-centered approach, the relationship
between language learning strategies and language proficiency, rather than
achievement, became the most researched topic. This is to be viewed in relation to the
fact that proficiency is the ultimate goal of all language learning or teaching programs
(Alqahtani, 2007). Yet, it should be noted that the previous studies on the relationship
between language learning strategies and language proficiency have generally yielded
mixed and inconsistent results (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Macaro, 2006).

An Arabic version of Oxford's SILL inventory was used in the current study in
order to increase the accuracy of responses as much as possible. This Arabic version
was adopted from Abu Shmais (2004).

The overall ESP proficiency of the participants was measured using a cloze test,
which dealt with current issues in the Gulf region. Every seventh word was deleted
from the passage of an approximate length of 450-50 words. The deleted words
connoted commonly used words in political discourses. The first and the last
sentences were left intact in order to provide the context of the statements for the
students. The total number of blanks amounted to 50. A score of '1' was marked for

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each correct retrieval and '0' for an empty blank or incorrect answer. The total score could, thus, vary between 0 to 50.

Procedure

The SILL was administered to the participants by the faculty during a regular class hour. Prior to the administration of the research instrument, the faculty was given the needed instructions related to the same. The participation was on a voluntary basis and the participants were assured of confidentiality of their identities.

Relevant statistical analyses were used to analyze collected data based on the frequency of the use of strategies, and the correlation between the type of language learning strategies used and English language proficiency. Additionally, for the purposes of data reduction and manipulation, the participants' responses to SILL were reduced to three general categories (cf., Oxford, 1990; Lan & Oxford, 2003):

- ✓ High use = 50 to 35(usually to always used);
- ✓ Medium use = 34 to 25(sometimes used); and
- ✓ Low use = 24 to 10 (never to usually not used).

Results and Discussion

The results are presented in two tables. Table 1 shows the overall frequency of English language learning strategies used by students attending an ESP course in political sciences while Table 2 shows the fifty items in detail.

Table 1

Overall preferences of language strategy use

Strategy category	M	SD	Rank
Metacognitive	4.10	0.58	1
Social	3.93	0.46	2
Compensation	3.88	0.49	3
Cognitive	3.67	0.52	4
Memory	3.58	0.37	5
Affective	2.89	0.37	6

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The examination of data in Table 1 reveals several noteworthy points. First, the standard deviations in all these categories are not high and this indicates the fact that the participants belong to the same study population. Second, taking into account the positive responses shown by participants towards using all strategies (probably except for the use of affective strategies), it appears that these learners seemed to have a certain degree of awareness related to the use of the language learning strategies. Third, since the results reveal that the metacognitive strategies were used more frequently than other strategies, it can safely be assumed that the participants were mentally conscious of the need to manage their language learning process with respect to planning, organizing, focusing, and evaluating their own learning. Fourth, the order of frequency of strategies used show that the participants do not follow a particular linear pattern of strategies preferred in language learning processes. Thus, social strategies, although they come after the metcognitive strategies, were more frequently used than cognitive and compensation strategies.

The following observations can be made from the correlation analyses of the data:

1. The correlations between ESP proficiency and metacognitive ($r= .79$, $p < .05$), cognitive ($r= .73$, $p < .05$), and compensation ($r= .70$, $p < .05$) strategies was high;

2. The correlation between ESP proficiency and affective strategies ($r= .65$, $p < .05$), and social strategies ($r= .59$, $p < .05$) respectively was medium; and

3. The correlation between ESP proficiency and memory strategies ($r= .30$, $p < .05$) was low.

It can be seen that the correlation coefficients of the use of different types of strategies are in line with the descriptive data (see Table 1) regarding the frequency of use. Two points are of importance here. First, cognitive strategies have been observed to be the fourth in terms of frequency of use. Second, social strategies have been observed to be the second in frequency of use, albeit the fact that its correlation with English language proficiency has been medium.

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Discussion and Conclusion

The findings discussed above show that English language proficiency is strongly correlated with the use of those strategies which focus on higher mental abilities, without ignoring the benefits of previous experiences that a learner can build on. On the other hand, attitudinal and emotional strategies (affective and social) can indicate the level of English language proficiency in ESP. The high frequency use of social strategies, however, might be attributed to two possible explanations: (a) participants were able to manage interacting with others to facilitate their learning including skills such as asking questions for clarification, cooperating with peers since the classroom is often the only opportunity for these learners to come into contact with the language; and (b) the existing curriculum design and teaching objectives emphasized the communicative aspects of English language skills.

It is not surprising to observe that the correlation between English language proficiency and memory strategies is low because language learning, as a cognitive process, is not restricted to a set of fixed formulae. Nonetheless, memory strategies as authorized language learning strategies should not be underestimated.

Finally, the findings reported in the current study have three significant implications. First, emphasizing the use of higher mental strategies can increase the opportunities for improving learners' language proficiency. Second, learners should be encouraged to adopt some other non-cognitive strategies to enhance their positive attitudes towards ESP since these positive attitudes are believed to be positively linked with language proficiency (Alqahtani, 2007). Third, it would be inappropriate to speculate that memory strategies are of no use; rather, if used with the intention of increasing long-term memory, memory could be prove to be a powerful tool to learn language.

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