



Language Learning Strategies among Arab EFL Postgraduate Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Language learning strategies are very essential for language learning as tools for active, self-directed involvement for developing the communicative competence. The study investigated the language learning strategies employed by a group of Arab postgraduate EFL students at National University of Malaysia. A total of 70 Arab students responded to the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire. Descriptive statistics was employed to understand the students' tendencies in using the language learning strategies. The results indicated that the participants utilized these strategies in average range. The most frequently used strategies were social strategies, followed by metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, affective and memory strategies. Based on the findings, implications for language learning strategy training were highlighted to raise the students' awareness of the significance of employing all language learning strategies.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, SILL, Arab EFL Students, National University of Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Research into language learning strategies (LLS henceforth) started in the 1960s. In most of the research on language learning strategies, the primary concern has been on identifying what good language learners reported they did to learn a second language. From the research to date, it is evident that all language learners used language learning strategies of some kind although the frequency and variety of use vary between learners and depend on a number of variables, such as gender, educational background, attitudes and others (Brown, 2001&Shmais 2003). Learning strategies are especially important for language learning as tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. From the teaching perspective, unlike most other characteristics of the learner such as personality and general cognitive style, learning strategies are readily teachable and the use of appropriate language learning strategies resulted in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence (Oxford 1990). Therefore, research which explores the effect of the learning strategies has practical advantages for the teaching and learning of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL). At the time the present study was conducted, most of the Arab students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) were postgraduate students doing their PhD and MA/MSc. programs in different faculties such as Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and Faculty of Information Technology. These students come from different Arab countries such as Jordan, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Oman which have diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

The Arab students who represent a big ratio of foreign students at UKM come from different Arab countries in which the first language in these countries is the Arabic language. In most of these Arab countries, English is rarely used among the people. In addition, the educational background of the majority of the Arab students could not be considered as encouraging with respect to the use of the English language. Thus, most of these students were considered as low proficiency learners in the English language and faced problems and challenges when trying to accommodate themselves to the new educational environment in Malaysia. This is because English is the medium of instruction in the various faculties where the students were studying.

There were so many demands on the Arab postgraduate students which they must cope with in order to progress in their studies, and most of the Arab students lack the sufficient language skills that might help them to meet these demands to be able to pursue their studies smoothly. These demands are highly significant for improving the students' academic achievements. The Arab students face the task of mastering the contents of their subjects such as sciences, mathematics, social sciences and others since these courses are taught in the English language. Therefore, learning of English can help the students to deal successfully with their academic demands. As postgraduate students they must have the abilities to utilize the appropriate academic writing because they are required to produce specific academic writing such as research papers, summaries, critical reviews and essays. Speaking skill is very important to enable the students convey their ideas and communicate properly with their professors and during their daily life. Speaking for academic purpose is very necessary for the Arab students in order to cope with the extent of English used in their concerned fields in the university. In addition to that, the students must have the ability to speak properly when negotiating with their professors and expressing their ideas and opinions and be generally understood by others.

Reading and listening skills also have important effects in developing the students' efforts to use the target language. Reading properly increases the students' academic success because when the students are good readers they will be able to understand the contents of the papers and books successfully. Also accurate reading enables the students to understand the important theories related to their fields of studies. Hence, the Arab students must excel in reading skills to improve their academic achievements. Additionally, listening has been regarded as the most important skills for students' academic success. It is very important for the Arab students to practice their listening skills in order to understand the messages very well and be able to communicate properly with others. The Arab students in this study were characterized as low proficient students and they might lack these important skills. Therefore, if they do not develop all of these skills it would be difficult for them to pursue their academic studies in their faculties.

The study aimed to examine the language learning strategies used by the Arab students with low proficiency and find out how the students tried to develop these skills. Limited numbers of studies have been conducted to investigate the Arab students' language learning strategies within similar contexts. Most of the existing studies in this field sought to investigate learning strategies involving non-Arab students, especially in western countries and Japan. Thus, information on how the Arab students learn English language, specifically the strategies they use to master the target language is important for enhancing their achievements in their academic studies.

Higher educational institutions such as the universities can be considered as rich environments for the students to learn and apply their learning strategies particularly language learning strategies. Being university students, they need to be exposed to the different language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Hence, these skills can be considered as an important part of the students' life, they must be able to handle them efficiently to improve their learning progress. The good students must be aware of the strategies that they use which will enable them to be successful in their study and overcome the difficulties that they may face along the way.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), effective learners normally use a variety of strategies and techniques to solve the problems that they face while acquiring or producing the language. One focus of research in the area of EFL has been that of the identification of how the learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information. The present study thus aimed to gather more information on this aspect of language learning by conducting a research involving the Arab postgraduate students in UKM. The Arab postgraduate students in UKM were just like other international students who faced problems in using the English language to communicate either orally or in writing. And most of these postgraduate students might use various kinds of language learning strategies that enable them to solve their English language problems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many definitions for language learning strategies have been put forward by many researchers from late 1970s till 1990s. The earliest definition for language learning strategy was by Rubin (1975) who identified language learning strategies as techniques or devices that the learner may use to acquire knowledge. Rigney (1978) defined language learning strategies as operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and application of information. Brown (1980) explained that language learning strategies are the process that may contribute directly to learning process. Tarone (1983) identified language learning strategies as an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the foreign language and these are incorporated into one's interlanguage competence. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) define language learning strategies as behaviours and thoughts that a learner engage in during learning, and these behaviours and thoughts intended to influence the learner's encoding process.

Previous Studies on Language Learning Strategy Use

A good number of studies highlighted the overall strategy use in different environments and by different researchers. A study conducted in Malaysia by Begam and Rajak (2004) investigated the language learning strategies used by 320 low achieving learners of ESL from both urban and rural schools in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The overall results obtained demonstrated that the low achieving learners did use language learning strategies but their use was generally of moderate frequency. There was also evidence that urban learners used memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social language learning strategies more often at moderate levels than rural learners who indicated rather low levels of the activity. Results obtained via interviews with teachers indicated that they were not aware of language learning strategies. They also expressed that the low achieving learners did not show interest in the English language lessons.

A case study was conducted by Al-Hardan (2007) to investigate the overall language learning strategies and practices for one Jordanian postgraduate student in UKM. The case's responses were elicited by means of SILL questionnaire and personal interview. The learner in the case study developed himself in various ways and was very motivated to learn English language. He managed to develop his proficiency in English from nil to higher level. The case's responses which were collected from the questionnaire explained that he utilized all the six types of language learning strategies as proposed by Oxford (1990). The personal interview with this respondent discovered many practices and strategy he used to develop his English skills. According to him, one of the strategies he employed was he spent a lot of time reading just to try to learn the language and grasp new vocabularies. The other practice used by the respondent was his involvement with the social communities in Malaysia. His active involvement with others in the surrounding communities had enabled him to develop his speaking and listening skills in the English language.

In the same vein, Alptekin (2007) conducted a study to by means of SILL to explore whether there are differences in the choice of language learning strategy and in the frequency of its use in the concurrent acquisition of two foreign languages, one being learned in a tutored and the other in a non-tutored manner. Specifically, the study examined the tutored learning of English in a formal setting and the non-tutored acquisition of Turkish in a non-formal setting by international university students. The subjects of the study were 25 international students at Bogaziçi University, in Istanbul. The males represented 60% and the females 40% of the sample. The results indicated that although the students utilized all types of learning strategies irrespective of the learning context, compensation as a direct learning strategy seems to be the one most frequently deployed in both tutored and naturalistic learning. On the other hand, a significant difference is observed in indirect strategy preference with respect to learning context: in tutored English learning students employed more of metacognitive strategies, whereas in non-tutored Turkish acquisition they often employed social strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The subjects involved in this study were 70 Arab postgraduate students who registered for their degree program in various disciplines such as Engineering, Information Technology, Mathematics, Religious Studies and others at UKM. Fifteen of them were female (n=15) and the rest were male (n=55) students. Thirty five (n=35) of the students were majoring in pure sciences while thirty five (n=35) were majoring in social sciences and humanities. The proficiency levels of these students in English were determined by their results in the English Proficiency Test (EPT) conducted by the School of Language Studies and Linguistics for the new candidates in UKM. The students were all considered as non-proficient students since they all achieved either bands 1 or 2.

Instrument

Oxford's (1990) SILL was adapted for the study as it had been considered to be more comprehensive in accounting for strategies used by learners. It had also been extensively field-tested for reliability and validity. The adapted Oxford's (1990) SILL was divided into six sections; A to F, based on Oxford's categorization of strategies description was based on the five-point Likert-scale. The version of the SILL used in this study was a 50-item instrument that was grouped into two main categories, direct strategies and indirect strategies, which were further subdivided into 6 groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Language Learning Strategies used by the Arab Postgraduate Students during the Process of Learning English as a Foreign Language

Table 1 below shows that the mean of overall strategy use was 3.3340 which was average strategy use according to Oxford's (1990) scale ranges from 1 to 5:

The findings showed that social strategy was used most frequently by this group of students followed by metacognitive strategy. Both strategy categories used with high range according to Oxford scale. While the rest of the strategies fell in the average range, compensation, cognitive, affective, except for the memory strategy which was used with low range. Table 1 below explains the LLS use by the Arab students:

Table 1: Language Learning Strategies (LLS) Use by the Arab Students (N=70)

Strategy Group	Lowest	Highest	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank Order of Usage
A Memory	1.58	3.05	2.4003	.25510	6
B Cognitive	2.30	3.84	3.4014	.16426	4
C Compensation	3.14	4.30	3.4600	.25346	3
D Meta-cognitive	3.30	4.85	3.7004	.25220	2
E Affective	2.31	3.33	2.7515	.23407	5
F Social	3.12	4.60	4.1024	.62314	1
Overall	3.32	3.40	3.3340	.53161	6

The results indicated that the students used five strategies ranging from average to high to improve their proficiency in English. These strategies respectively were social strategy (M=4.1024), metacognitive strategy (M=3.7004), compensation strategy (M=3.4600), cognitive strategy (M=3.4014), affective strategy (M=2.7515) which showed positive attitudes for these students toward learning English. Memory strategy used with low range by the students (M=2.4003). The students focused primarily on social strategy which showed that the students planned to communicate and be sociable with others to practice their English skills. Apparently, the students

considered this strategy as the most important strategy which enabled them to practice their English everywhere and anytime.

Using metacognitive strategy with high range may show the readiness of the students to improve their English skills, and indicates that they tried to find many ways to learn, practice and be better learners in English. The other strategies used by the students with average range, this might be attributed to their lack of awareness of the importance of using all language learning strategies in developing their English proficiency. Memory strategy used by the students in low range, this might be because the students were not familiar with some of the items in this category, such as acting new English words physically or using flashcards to remember the new English words. Again this indicates the students' lack of knowledge about using an important language learning strategies.

The statistical analysis also showed that the most used item by the Arab postgraduate students in the memory strategies category was, (I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used) $M=3.0120$ while the least used strategy was (I physically act out new English words) $M= 1.2003$. Perhaps this low use for this strategy was because the students were not familiar with this kind of strategy, since it is concluded that they focused much on using social strategy as the best way to improve their English proficiency. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), memorization strategies which relate to the process of storage and retrieval of the information can be considered as one of the most important strategies in language learning. Moreover, they perceived language learning strategies as a techniques and devices used by the learners of second language for remembering and organizing samples of the language used. The students used this strategy in low average because they were not familiar and not aware enough to use such strategies.

As for the cognitive strategies, the most used strategy by the students was (I try not to translate word for word) $M=3.3550$ while the least used strategy was (I read for pleasure in English) $M=1.5240$. Cognitive strategies were used to help the learners to grasp the second language by employing many thinking processes such as reasoning, analysis, and drawing conclusions. Using the dictionary to find the difficult words, and the use of the drill to practice English language were also among the cognitive strategies employed by the respondents.

The most frequently utilized strategy in the compensation strategies was (if I cannot think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing) $M= 4.1500$ and the least used strategy was (to understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses) $M=1.2007$. Compensation strategies help the learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production and help them to avoid the limitations of their knowledge in the target language.

Memorization, cognitive and compensation strategies are considered by Oxford as direct strategies for learning English language. These strategies involve learning directly like using linguistic clues to guess meaning or translating directly from L1 to L2. Further, they influence language learning directly through the process of clarification, monitoring, memorization, guessing, reasoning and practice (O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

In the present study, metacognitive strategies were found to be as important strategies for learning foreign or second language among the students. They indicated that the most common meacognitive strategy was that they noticed their English mistakes and use that information to help them do better $M=3.6240$. And the least metacognitive strategy used was that they planned their schedule so they will have enough time to study English $M=2.0615$. Metacognitive strategies help the learners to manage, organize, and monitor their learning process, and give them the opportunity to notice their mistakes in the process of learning English and try to avoid these mistakes in the future. In addition, these strategies guided the students to regulate their own cognition by assessing how they learn and by planning for future language tasks. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) students without metacognitive approaches are considered like students without directions and opportunities to monitor their progress, and plan their learning or review their accomplishments.

Affective strategies also played crucial role to enhance and improve the students' abilities to learn English as a second language easily. Strategies in this category involved the learners controlling their feelings toward the whole learning process, in which they tried to relax whenever they felt that they were nervous when using the second language. The analysis indicated that the most frequently used strategy by the students was that they tried to relax whenever they felt afraid of using English $M= 4.0221$. Meanwhile, the least used strategy was that they talked to someone else about how they felt when learning English $M=1.3000$. Social strategies are those activities which the learners engaged in which in turn offered them the opportunities to be exposed to new knowledge. These strategies provide exposure to the target language indirectly so that they help in storing, retrieving and using the target language indirectly. They can be considered as a social form of learning language since they involve contacts with others such as questioning or asking for clarification.

For the category of social strategy, the most frequent used by the students was that they practiced English with other students, $M=4.4355$ because they believed that this was the best strategy which can enable them enhance their English skills. The students did not ask English speakers to correct them when they talked in which this strategy was used the least $M= 2.3500$. Metacognitive, affective, social strategies are all indirect strategies based on Oxford's (1990) classification. These involve learning the foreign language indirectly such as creating and seeking opportunities to learn the target language as much as possible. Social strategy was the most used strategy by the Arab postgraduate students, and this indicated that these students depended basically on contacting with others to practice their English skills and improve their abilities in the target language.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study focused at investigating language learning strategies used by the Arab postgraduate students at UKM. The results indicated that the students were average strategy users. Social and metacognitive strategies used highly by the students. Compensation strategies, cognitive strategies affective strategies used in average range and the least employed were memory strategies. The present study could be considered as a preliminary effort in identifying the language learning strategies used especially by the Arab postgraduate students in general. Further research is suggested by the present researcher in order to have a clearer picture about the nature of the Arab postgraduate students in using such language learning strategies. It is proposed that future research must take into account all other variables that may affect language learning strategy choice by the Arab postgraduate students such as the immediate environment, the educational and cultural background.

Further, involving greater numbers of the Arab postgraduate students to participate in future research would be very useful as this will give clearer outcomes about the nature of using language learning strategies by Arab postgraduate students. During the research and as well as the analysis process other ideas turned up that might be of interest and worthwhile to investigate more about language learning strategies employed by the Arab postgraduate students. It would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal study and use multiple data collecting instruments to examine the nature of language learning strategies employed by the Arab students and understand exactly how they think about their learning process.

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