PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AMONG JORDANIAN STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the relationship between proficiency level and language learning strategies (LLSs) among Jordanian students enrolled at Universiti Utara Malaysia. The frequency level of the LLSs employed by the students was also investigated. The theoretical foundation for the study was provided by three comprehensive theories which are the Behaviorism, the Cognitive Psychology, and the Schema Theory. The data for the LLSs was obtained from using Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) that classifies six different strategies: 1) Memory Strategy (MS), (2) Cognitive Strategy (COG), (3) Compensation Strategy (COMPS), (4) Metacognitive Strategies (MET), (5) Affective Strategy (AFCS) and (6) Social Strategies (SOC). The frequency of the students' overall use of LLSs was determined on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from high frequency use (3.5-5.0), medium frequency use (2.5-3.49), to low frequency use (1.0-2.49). Questionnaires were distributed and collected from a total of 97 students. Meanwhile, the students' level of language proficiency was determined by their scores in the UUM English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT). Upon using the multiple regression analysis, the results show that the students used language learning strategies at a high frequency level. In addition, this study shows that there is a positive relationship between language learning strategy and proficiency level. These results indicate that proficiency level plays a vital role in determining the kinds of language learning strategy used. Curriculum designers and related bodies in Jordan should increase focus on the role of language learning strategies in promoting the acquisition of English language proficiency. The study also opens up avenues for more studies on language learning strategies not only in Jordan, but also in other countries where this area of study is lacking.

KEYWORDS: Proficiency Level, Language Learning Strategies, Jordanian Students

INTRODUCTION

Studies acknowledge that language learners do not necessarily address the learning process in the same style. Therefore, there are differences in the strategies employed by one learner to another in language learning. Such differences are divided into qualitative and quantitative differences. Nevertheless, these language learning strategies (LLS) share the same aim, i.e., to learn language successfully. In this context, language learners, whether consciously or unconsciously tend to follow a certain strategy to reach the target (Chamot, 2004).

Based on the perspectives of researchers and academics, language learning strategies' definitions vary from researcher to researcher. Many researchers exerted a great effort to understand what LLS are, how they are organized and how they help second language learners in their process of learning. Some definitions of the LLS from previous research concern the retention, input and recall in information processing. Rubin (1987) defined LLS as operations, steps, plans, or routines that the learner uses to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information. Similarly, Oxford (1999) illustrated that LLS are "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their own progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language," and they can "facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language" (p.518).

This variance in learners' preferences in learning has been the interest of many scholars, academics, researchers and policy makers to determine the most common strategies along with the least frequently used strategies to achieve the ultimate target of enhancing language learning. Commonly, these researches adopted the strategy measure issued by Oxford (1990) namely "Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL)" which opens the road for conducting further studies with comparable outcomes.

In this study, one main aim of examining such strategies is to gain more insights into the LLS involved in language learning and how to assist learners who are facing difficulties become better language students. Examining such strategies is also significant because they are readily teachable (Chamot 2001). Rong (1999) pointed out that the frequency of strategy use was higher among more proficient learners, which suggests that there is a significant relationship among proficiency level and the strategies of language learners. This study also focuses on the proficiency level because it contributes significantly in determining the language learning strategies used.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Jordanian students who seek to acquire English as a foreign language face a particularly challenging task due to the linguistic differences between English and Arabic. Jordan is a country in which English language has a somewhat ambiguous situation in various aspects such as public school system along with higher education, and social and business interactions. In addition, previous related studies have reported that there is a lack of studies addressing language learning strategies in the Middle-East, particularly in Jordan (Al-Khasawneh, 2013). English as a foreign or second language studies have only recently begun to consider second language acquisition among learners in many Asian, African and Middle-Eastern countries and the rate is increasing.

Very few studies have been carried so far on the effective and specific EFL pedagogy for native learners in Jordan (Al-Khasawneh, 2012). The results of these studies generally provide very little ideas and insights into the practices of EFL in the Jordanian context. Countries in the Middle-East in general have difficult geographic locations especially for outsiders such Americans, British and other foreigners who want to visit for investigative and educational purposes involving these populations. This point contributes negatively to the complexity of the issues related to research in language learning.

In order to improve the English education quality, the Jordanian government followed the private sector in introducing some of the language policies and programs such as decreasing the size of class, introducing intensive language programs, and teaching techniques and theories. Nevertheless, some important factors did not receive a considerable interest by researchers; only a few studies have been carried out to investigate LLS. In addition, very few studies have tested the association between personality traits of EFL learners and language learning strategies. Accordingly, the current study contributes to the related literature by filling the gap in previous studies by highlighting one of the important factors, namely, proficiency level that is associated with the language learning strategies on a sample of students who belong to a developing country such as Jordan.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The current study offers the following research questions:

1. What is the level of frequency of LLS employed by Jordanian students at Universiti Utara Malaysia based on Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning SILL (version 7.0)?
2. Is there any association between proficiency level and LLS among Jordanian students in Universiti Utara Malaysia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chamot and El-Dinary (1999) documented that the theories of learning may not explain or predict all variations in learners, but it can provide an understanding framework of commonalities between learners and reasons behind individual variations. Some of the learning theories which underpin the LLS concepts and the level of proficiency include Behaviorism, Cognitive Psychology and Schema Theory.

Behaviorism is deemed as an approach to psychology that contains its ancestry in positivism. It has had a profound impact on teaching language widely. The main principle of this theory depends on the analysis of human behavior in observable stimulus-response interaction and the relations among them. Cognitive psychology is concerned with a way in which the human mind learns and thinks. It centers on how people draw and build up upon their memories and the methods in which they become actively engaged in the learning process. They employ a set of mental strategies to sort out the language system to be learned (Williams & Burden, 1997). Schema Theory, on the other hand, considers the concept of knowledge about relationships with other things, events, situations and sequences of actions. According to Chamot and El-Dinary (1999), learning occurs during our attempts to understand and organize our life experiences based on our previous knowledge.

In the literature, there are different classifications of learning strategies. For example, Joan and Rubin (1987) have categorized the strategies into three major categories, which are learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies. Oxford (1990) has divided learning strategies into two main categories: indirect and direct, where indirect strategies support the business of language learning while direct strategies directly involve the target language. There are three classes of direct strategies proposed by Oxford (1990) which are memory, compensation and cognitive, while indirect strategies include metacognitive, social and affective strategies. These six strategies are the concerns of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL).

Different studies have attempted to determine various factors that influence language learning strategies, including gender (Hong-Nam &Leavell, 2006; Vandergriff, 1997), socio cultural background (Grainger, 1997; Littlewood, 1999), academic major (Chou, 2002; Peacock &Ho, 2003), and proficiency level (Griffiths, 2003; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Oxford &Ehrman, 1995). This study focuses on one of these factors, i.e., proficiency level, because it is considered one of the most important factors that influence the choice of learning strategies (Griffiths, 2003).

Many studies pointed out a strong positive relationship between language proficiency level and the use of appropriate language learning strategies (Khalil, 2005; Shmais, 2003). Numerous research employed different aspects of language proficiency level to examine their role in applying language learning strategies. Such variables included the duration of study for the learners (Khalil, 2005), their scores in TOEFL test (Nisbet, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005), their self-rating in language proficiency (Oxford &Nvikos, 1989), judgments of teachers about their students (Magogwe& Oliver, 2007) and students' GPAs in English language courses (Shmais, 2003). Lan & Oxford (2003) examined the English foreign language EFL for Taiwanese students in elementary school and they pointed out that the learners with higher level of proficiency employ compensatory, cognitive, and metacognitive and affective strategies more effectively as compared to the less proficient students. The study of Bruen (2001) sought to identify the language learning strategies employed by a group of Irish learners who were learning German as a second language and he documented that there is a positive association between German proficiency and the use of strategies.

As regard to the modern studies, Abdul Ghani, Mahfuz and Md. Saad (2014)sought to investigate the association among LLS and the proficiency level among learners in Malaysia. The findings reported that as a whole, the learners employed LLS at a moderate level. The most frequently used strategy was Metaphysics strategy. In addition, they reported that talented students employed the LLS more frequently and often as compared to other learners of different proficiency levels. The results reported that there was a positive and significant correlation between LLS and the level of proficiency. Platsidou and Sipitanou (2014) in their study conducted in Northern Greece found a significant association between strategies employed and perceived language proficiency level, with high-level learners employing strategies more frequently than low and intermediate-level learners.

METHODOLOGY

97 (86 male and 11 female) out of 120 Jordanian students enrolled at Universiti Utara Malaysia were taken as a population for this study. Questionnaires were distributed to the participants to investigate the relationship between proficiency level and LLS. The dependent variable in this study is language learning strategies, while the independent variable is proficiency level. The questionnaire was designed to have two sections. The first is the demographic information of the respondents such as gender, academic major, age and their scores in ELPT exam conducted by the university at the beginning of each academic semester. This score is used to measure the independent variable, which is proficiency level of the student. The second section contains 50 items (questions) to determine the language learning strategies employed by the students. This section adopted Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL) as it is widely used to determine LLS.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

To answer Research Question 1, Table 1 below shows the results of the overall mean frequency score of language learning strategies obtained from 97 students who are studying at UUM.

Table 1: Frequency Score of Students' Overall Use of LLS

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Frequency category
Overall	97	1	5	3.47	.122	Medium Use
Valid (listwise)	97					

As seen in Table 1, the mean frequency score of students' overall use of language learning strategies is (Mean=3.47, Std. Deviation=.122). These results reveal that the respondents used language learning strategies at medium frequency level.

As presented earlier in the literature review chapter, Language Learning Strategies (LLS) of the current investigation are grouped into six main categories based on Oxford's (1990) classification of LLS. These six main categories are: (1) Memory Strategy (MS), (2) Cognitive Strategy (COG), (3) Compensation Strategy (COMPS), (4) Metacognitive Strategies (MET), (5) Affective Strategy (AFCS), and (6) Social Strategies (SOC).

Table 2: Level of Using LLS in the Six Categories

Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank	Frequency Category
Metacognitive	97	4.34	.164	1	High use
Cognitive	97	3.78	.229	2	High use
Memory	97	3.62	.263	3	High use
Affective	97	3.43	.217	4	Medium use
Social	97	3.42	.239	5	Medium use
Compensation	97	3.28	.238	6	Medium use

As revealed in Table 2, the participants used a high level of strategy use in three categories, and medium level in three other strategies. The most preferred strategies among the six strategies were Metacognitive strategies (Mean=4.34, Std. Deviation=.164), followed by Cognitive strategies (Mean=3.78, Std. Deviation=.229), Memory strategies (Mean=3.62, Std. Deviation=.263), Affective strategies (Mean=3.43, Std. Deviation=.217), Social strategies (Mean=3.42, Std. Deviation=.239), and Compensation strategies was the

least frequent strategies among the six categories (Mean=3.28, Std. Deviation=.238). Low degree of strategy use was not found in any of the six categories of language learning strategies.

The results show that the students used language learning strategies at the high frequency level, this result is supported by Kalajahi, Nimehchisalem&Pourshahian (2012) who documented that there is a high level of strategies used by students. In addition, this study reported that there is a medium degree of usage for the language strategies among students. This result is congruent with a number of studies which found medium mean scores of strategy use (Celic&Toptas, 2010; Cengizhan, 2011; Wharton, 2000).

The results are expected as students employed a wide variety of strategies, some to a lesser extent and others to a larger extent (Vrettou, 2011). One possible reason for students' low use of LLS is that they are not aware of the various LLS because they have not been introduced to them (Kudo, 1999; Fan, 2003). Another explanation for such finding is that, students rely heavily on specific strategies and they rarely exploit other LLS (Gu& Johnson, 1996). Furthermore, as Gu, Wen and Wu (1995) point out, the terms used to describe various aspects of behavior may be interpreted differently by different students (what is "often" for one student may be rated as less frequent by another) and limitations in language ability and the effects of cultural background may also affect responses (Turner, 1993).

Examination of the role of LLS in acquiring the language is important in detecting for more understanding of the language learning nature. The investigation of such strategies and such interaction with the various variables (such as nationality, age, and level of proficiency) calls for more studies to highlight on this complicated area and broad field of learning language. There was an agreement on the global level on the necessity of such strategies (Burt, Dulay&Finocchiaro, 1997). The understanding of what kind of strategies best serve the students allows them to overcome the difficulties they face during the language learning stages. In addition, researchers and scholars have sought to create an association among LLS and successful learning of language and their linkage to proficiency of language.

To answer Research Question 2, this study employs Bivariate Correlation and calculates Pearson's correlation coefficient with its significance level. In more details, Table 3 demonstrates the correlation coefficient between the dependent and independent variables. The coefficient for proficiency level is consistent with the expectation that has a positive direction. The table shows that there is a positive and significant correlation between proficiency level and LLS at .05 level.

Table 3:Correlations Test

	LLS	proficiency
LLS	1	.222[*]
proficiency	.222[*]	1

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The aim of teaching the foreign or second language is to assist students to reach the desired language proficiency. Such goal has been mentioned through certain standards or objectives as reported by Stern (1992). Stern sets the concepts and illustration of the level of proficiency a significant stage in learning other languages.

After the empirical work on the relationship among language LLS and the level of language proficiency, researchers and scholars such as Cook (1999) and Ellis (1994) have documented a tangible association among LLS use and proficiency level. Others have claimed that successful second language learners think in the second language and refer to the affective strategies in language learning (Naiman et al., 1978). Some research has claimed that the proficient students and good in using language are more likely to acquire the

second language by using various strategies. On the other hand, non-proficient students might not perform like proficient students and if they act the same as the proficient students do, they may not acquire the language efficiently (Cook, 1999).

The findings of this study are consistent with the Politzers' and McGroartys' (1985) findings, as they examined the association among a set of proper activities to learn certain language and the level of proficiency. In addition, they pointed out that the association among LLS and the level of proficiency is clear not only as a one-way direction leading from cause to such effect, but rather as an ascending spiral in which active applied strategies help learners obtain higher level of proficiency. This study reported that there is a strong direct association among proficiency level of learners and their choice of learning strategies. The results are also consistent with other researchers such as Vann and Abraham (1990) and Bremner (1999) who pointed out that unsuccessful students employ strategies usually considered as appropriate and useful in certain situations. Good students demonstrate more consistency in using effective strategies. Their results indicated that good students employ a great range of strategies, and employ such strategies more frequently according to their levels of proficiency.

Thus, it is concluded that the association among the kind of language strategy and students' level of proficiency is a direct association, that is, the good learners with good level of proficiency employ various kinds of strategies. In conclusion, LLS play an important role in the learning process. The evidences have reported that strategies of learning are deeply associated with successful learning (Nyikos& Oxford, 1993). Subsequently, instructors of languages are advised to become close with the strategies of language learning.

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