

Language Learning Strategy Use by Multilingual Adult Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract

The present study, after discussing the Language Learning Strategy (LLS) use made by the Foreign Language (FL) learners in the domain of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking, analyzes the strategies from cognitive and metacognitive perspectives. The scope of the paper is not essentially quantitative, i.e., it is not restricted to the frequency of LLS use but it dwells on the qualitative domain by making an elaborate discussion on the impact of proficiency and learner variables like gender, level of study, motivation, level of confidence, medium of instruction in school and age of the learners on their respective LLS use. The paper ends by providing the pedagogical implications of the findings.

Key Words: Language Learning Strategy, Language Learning, Language Teaching, Learner Variables, Multilingual Adult Foreign Language Learners

1.1 Introduction

In the last 40 years there has been a major shift from teaching to learning in the domain of Language education. The focus has shifted from the teacher to the learner as a result of which the concepts of self-directed learning, open learning, learner autonomy etc. have become integral parts of language pedagogy. It has been found in literature that Language Learning Strategies make learning more self-directed, effective and enjoyable (Oxford, 1990), paving the way for a confident and autonomous language learner. A language learner who is empowered with Language Learning Strategies will, in the long run, be capable of managing her/his own learning.

However there has been comparatively very less number of research in the domain of Language Learning Strategies (LLS). Among the handful of studies that have been conducted,

most of them deals with Second Language learners (O'Malley et al., 1985; De Silva, 2015 etc.) and the LLS have generally been studied only from cognitive and metacognitive perspectives (Rubin, 1981; Oxford, 1990 etc.). The purpose of the present study is to find out the strategies that directly contribute to the development of LSRW skills in adult Foreign Language Learners. Given the methodology this study will be adopting, it can, by and large, be called a quantitative, cross-sectional and subjective study based on empirical data.

1.2 Literature Review

O'Malley, et al. (1985:43) states that language learning strategies are “extremely powerful language learning tools”. Oxford (1990) points out that language learning strategies not only develop communicative competence but also improve the self-confidence of the learners. She points out that though language learning strategies have been formally named only recently, it has been used by good students since ancient times. However there has been comparatively less number of research in the domain of Language Learning Strategies (LLS). The initial studies in the field of language teaching and learning were, however, more about “developing theories, methods and approaches for teaching language (such as the Grammar Translation Method, audiolingualism and the communicative approach)” (Griffiths, 2013:1); evidently the focus was more on the process of teaching than on learning.

The few studies that have been conducted are generally on Second Language (SL) Learners and SL and FL learning contexts have been used synonymously (Oxford, 1990). However, there is a certain degree of difference between Second Language learning and Foreign language learning, to quote Oxford (1990:6) "the difference between learning a second language and learning a foreign language is usually viewed in terms of where the language is learned and what social and communicative functions the language serves there." Whereas learning a second language provides immediate socio-economic benefits within the country where it is learnt, a foreign language doesn't have any in the country where it is learnt but is useful to communicate elsewhere. The differences between Second and Foreign Language contexts are prevalent and have their impacts on the learning strategies for instance a person learning a Second Language has much greater access to the language inputs and also have a wider domain of its use; whereas same is not the case with a Foreign Language learner. Hence, a Second Language learner might

implement various social strategies but a Foreign Language learner will not be able to do the same.

2. Methodology

The study at hand was a cross-sectional i.e. “data was collected at a single point in time” (Ellis, 2008:61), primary study i.e. study “based on primary, or original, data sources, such as classroom observation of real students, .., or their response to a questionnaire” (Brown, 2001:1) based on empirical data. The questionnaire for the study has been designed such that it can be analyzed quantitatively so as to arrive at a definite conclusion from an otherwise qualitative data. The quantitative approach has been adopted in order to fulfill the aims with which the study has been undertaken i.e. to find out the quantity and frequency of Language Learning Strategy use among learners.

2.1 Participants

30 Foreign Language (FL) learning (Russian, Korean, Chinese and Japanese) undergraduate students at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India participated in the study. Among these 30 students, the Mother Tongue (MT) of 19 students were Hindi, 5 students had Bangla as their MT, 2 students had Maithili as their MT, 1 each had Magahi, Odiya, Maitei and Paite as their MT. 19 students had done their schooling from English medium schools while the rest of the 11 students had done it from regional medium schools. The students knew on an average 4 languages.

2.2 Tools

A Language Skill Development Strategy (LSDS) questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The questionnaire consisted of 47 questions the answers to which had to be given on a 5-point Likert Type scale ranging from “Never-Always”. The questionnaire was broadly divided into four sections i.e. Reading Strategies (9 questions), Writing Strategies (17 questions), Listening Strategies (10 questions) and Speaking Strategies (11 questions). The questionnaire was subjected to Cronbach’s Alpha test to test its reliability and it recorded an average alpha reading of 0.75 making it a reliable questionnaire. While designing the questionnaire, Top-down, Bottom-up and Metacognitive Listening Strategies (Yeldham,

2016), Pre-post Strategy Instruction questionnaire for Writing (Silva, 2015), LSD (Griffiths, 2013) and SILL (Oxford, 1990) have been consulted. In the semi-structured interview, the learners were asked to express their beliefs about learning the FL, how they think their personality, learning background etc. is affecting their FL learning.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

After analyzing the results of the questionnaire in the above mentioned four categories, the questions are further divided into Cognitive (24 questions) and Metacognitive strategies (23 questions) and are analyzed; followed by this, the effects of the other variables on language learning strategy use like age, sex etc. are also seen.

3. Discussion of Results

3.1 Reading Strategies

The average of the reported use of Reading Strategies made by the FL learners was 3.65. The students reported the highest use of the strategy of using a dictionary to get the exact meaning (4.52), followed by underlining sentences and revising them often and guessing the approximate meaning by using the clues from the context (4.21). Whereas they reported making the lowest use of two strategies; they are using the library to obtain reading materials (2.78) and reading in the FL for pleasure (2.83). Overall they have reported using 5 reading strategies highly frequently. (See Appendix I for the table)

3.2 Writing Strategies

The average of the reported use of Writing Strategies made by the FL learners was 3.36 making them writing strategy under-users. The students reported the highest use of the strategy of learning from corrections (4.29), using other ways to express the meaning in case they failed to find the correct expression (4.25), planning before writing (4.08) and using reference materials while writing (4.04). The FL learners reported the lowest use of strategies of writing a diary (1.45), writing letters or emails to friends in FL (2.5) and attempting only those questions in the exam whose answer they exactly remember (2.75). They have reported using only 8 out of 18 writing strategies highly frequently. (See Appendix II for table)

3.3 Listening Strategies

The average of the reported use of Listening Strategies made by the FL learners was 3.82. They have reported the highest use of the strategy of listening carefully how native speakers pronounce the FL and learn from them (4.45), followed by listening to key words which carry most of the meaning (4). In the domain of Listening Strategies, the learners reported using 9 out of the 10 strategies highly frequently. The only strategy which they reported using comparatively less frequently was attending out of class events like seminars, lectures etc. where they could listen to the FL being spoken (3.41). Compared to the domains of reading and writing, the learners have evidently more strategies in the domain of listening. (See Appendix III for table)

3.4 Speaking Strategies

The average of the reported use of Speaking Strategies made by the FL learners was 3.78. The learners reported the highest use of the strategy of remembering the corrections and avoiding making the same mistake again (4.29), followed by speaking the new FL to oneself in order to practice it (4.12) and trying to pronounce FL like the native speakers (4). The learners reported the lowest use of strategies of not worrying about correctness as long as the meaning can be conveyed (3.12), translating from the MT in case of not getting the correct expression and using gestures to convey the meaning (3.25). Overall, they have reported 8 out of 11 strategies highly frequently in the domain of speaking. (See Appendix IV for table)

3.5 Cognitive Strategies

The FL learners have reported using the Cognitive Strategies quite frequently (3.54). Among the four different kinds of Cognitive Strategies i.e. Processing Strategies (9 strategies), Creative Strategies (4 strategies), Monitoring Strategies (7 strategies) and Memory Strategies (4 strategies), the learners have reported using the Memory Strategies most frequently (3.78) which is quite expected since they are low level learners who have just started learning the given FL. The next popular Cognitive Strategy is Monitoring Strategies (3.67), followed by Processing Strategies (3.63). The only type of Cognitive Strategy of which the learners have reported a low use is Creative Strategies (3.08) which is again quite expected since they haven't reached that

stage in FL learning where they are capable of producing creative texts. Overall, out of the 24 Cognitive Strategies, the learners have reported using 14 of them highly frequently.

3.6 Metacognitive Strategies

The FL learners have reported using the Metacognitive Strategies (3.59) almost as frequently as the Cognitive Strategies thus establishing the fact that they are balanced strategy users. Among the six different kinds of Metacognitive Strategies i.e. Resourcing Strategies (4 strategies), Compensation Strategies (7 strategies), Planning Strategies (2 strategies), Formulating Strategies (3 strategies), Affective Strategies (3 strategies), Social Strategies (4 strategies) the learners have reported using the Formulating Strategies (3.95), the Resourcing Strategies and Social Strategies (3.9) most frequently. The next popular set of Metacognitive Strategies is the Compensation Strategies (3.84). The least popular set of Metacognitive Strategies is the Affective Strategies (2.6), followed by the Formulating Strategies (3.41). Overall, out of the 23 Metacognitive Strategies, the learners have reported using 16 of them highly frequently.

3.7 FL Score and LLS Use

The learners were divided into three categories according to the grades they obtained in the class i.e. high scorers (grades A+ and A), medium scorers (grades A- and B+) and low scorers (grades B and lower). Out of the 30 students who participated in the study, 8 of them belonged to the high scorer category, 13 to the medium scorer category and 9 to the low scorer category. It was found that the score obtained by the students was directly proportional to their LLS use. It was found that the high scoring learners made the maximum use of the LLS (3.83) followed by the medium scoring learners (3.76) and the low scoring learners (3.2). An ANOVA test revealed that the differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

3.8 Learner Variables and LLS Use

i) Gender and LLS Use

Among the 30 learners, who participated in this study, 17 were female and 13 were male. It was found that the female learners (3.64) used slightly more LLS than the male learners

(3.55).A T-test revealed that the differences were not statistically significant. Hence, it can be concluded that the gender of the learners had almost no impact on their strategy use.

ii) Level of Study and LLS Use

Among the 30 undergraduate FL learning students, who participated in the study, 8 belonged to 1st year, 12 belonged to 2nd year and 10 belonged to 3rd year. It was found that the students in the first year of study made the maximum use of LLS (3.75) followed by the second year students (3.59) and the third year students (3.37) making the comparatively highest level students LLS under-users. However, the differences are not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) hence it can be said that the level of learning doesnot have much impact on the strategy use of the learners.

iii) Motivation and LLS Use

It was found that the motivation of the students was directly proportional to the LLS. The students who were highly motivated were generally regular in the class despite JNU having a free attendance system. 18 out of 30 learners considered themselves to be highly motivated and the average use of their LLS was 3.87. Whereas, on the other hand, 8 had an average level of motivation, and, the average of their LLS use was 3.42. 4 learners had low levels of motivation and the average of their LLS use was 3. An ANOVA test revealed that the differences in the strategy use among these three groups of learners were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) establishing the direct connection between positive motivation and high strategy use.

iv) Confidence and LLS Use

It was found that the confidence of the students was also directly proportional to the LLS use. 12 of the 30 learners the interview claimed to be highly confident and, the average of the LLS use was 3.94. 12 learners considered themselves to have a medium level of motivation and the average of their LLS use was 3.57. 6 learners said that they lack in confidence and the average of their LLS use was 2.96. The difference in the strategy use among the three groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

v) Medium of Instruction and LLS Use

It was found that the learners who came from English medium background made more use of Language Learning Strategies than their regional medium counterparts. 11 out of the 30 learners had a regional medium background of schooling while 19 of them were from English medium backgrounds. The average of LLS use made by the regional medium background learners was 3.35, whereas, the average of LLS use made by the English medium background learners was 3.74. However, a T-test revealed that the differences were not statistically significant.

vi) Age and LLS Use

Since all the learners belonged to the age group of 19-22, a comparative study of their LLS use was not done. Instead, they were asked how they thought learning a FL at a later age was different from learning their Second Language at school. They learners informed that since with age they have become more self-conscious and worried of what other people think of them, language learning have become a relatively difficult task than it used to be.

4. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The study shows that there is a direct relationship between LLS use and academic performance of the learners. Literature shows that LLS are teachable (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989) and it has been seen that Strategy Instructions accelerate the process of language learning (Sarafianou & Gavriilidou, 2015; Silva, 2015; Yeldham, 2016). Hence, amalgamating Strategy Instructions in the FL course will enable the learners to learn the language faster and better. The study also shows that the learners are under-users of LLS in the domain of writing. They should be encouraged to use more LLS in the domain of writing.

It is also noticed that as the student makes progress in learning, their LLS use decreases. External motivation plays a major role in FL learning (Root, 1999). The semi-structured interview with the learners revealed that as they progress to higher levels their motivation for language learning decreases as the scope of using the language they are learning is very limited. The teachers must create innovative environment in the classroom and give assignments such as will enable the learners to enhance their interest which will in turn lead them to use more LLS as

a result of which their learning capacity will increase and they will become successful language learners.

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APPENDIX I

SL. No.	READING STRATEGIES	Cognitive(C)/ Metacog. (M)	N=30
1	I read extensively for information in FL	Processing. C	3.16
2	I read for pleasure in FL	Processing. C	2.83
3	I use a library to obtain reading material	Resourcing M	2.78
4	I first skim read a text then go back and read it more carefully	Processing. C	3.47
5	I underline the sentences I find important in the text and revise them often	Memory. C	4.21
6	I write notes in the margin to help remind me of the things I need to come back to after reading	Memory. C	4.04
7	I make summaries of what I read	Processing. C	3.60
8	I guess the approximate meaning by using clues from the context	Compensation. M	4.21
9	I use a dictionary to get the exact meaning	Resourcing M	4.52
	Average		3.65
	Number of Strategies reportedly used highly frequently		5

APPENDIX II

Sl. No.	WRITING STRATEGIES	Cognitive(C)/ Metacog. (M)	N = 30
10	I write letters or emails to friends in FL	Creative. C	2.5
11	When my mistakes are corrected, I learn from the corrections	Resourcing. M	4.29
12	I write a variety of text types in FL (e.g. notes, messages, emails etc.)	Creative. C	3.16
13	Most of the writings I do in FL is for making notes for exams	Creative. C	3.5
14	I plan my writing before I start	Planning. M	4.08
15	If I cannot think of correct expressions I think of another way to express my meaning (e.g. synonyms)	Compensation. M	4.25
16	If I cannot think of a correct expression I translate it from my Mother Tongue into FL	Monitoring. C	3.83
17	I translate the FL sentences I write into my Mother Tongue to see if the message is clear	Monitoring. C	3
18	I avoid writing complex sentences to reduce errors	Monitoring. C	3.62
19	In exams I only attempt those questions whose answers I can remember as it is in my notebook	Memory. C	2.75

20	In exams I attempt only those questions which I can write in my own words	Creative. C	3.16
21	I revise several times before submitting	Formulating. M	3.29
22	I support my ideas with examples from my readings	Formulating. M	3.58
23	I try out complex sentences that I have identified from reading	Formulating. M	3.37
24	I use reference material (e.g. dictionary, thesaurus or grammar book) to check what I am writing is correct	Resourcing. M	4.04
25	If I am unsure about something I want to write I try to express my meaning and do not worry too much about correctness	Affective. M	3.25
26	I write a diary in FL	Affective. M	1.45
	Average		3.36
	Number of Strategies used highly frequently		8

APPENDIX III

Sl. No.	LISTENING STRATEGIES	Cognitive(C)/ Metacog. (M)	N = 30
27	I attend out of class events (seminars, conferences, talks etc.) where I can listen to the new language (FL) being spoken	Processing. C	3.41
28	I use media (e.g. YouTube, TV, radio, movies) to practice my listening skills	Processing. C	3.87
29	I listen to native speakers in public places (e.g. shops, restaurants, buses) and try to understand what they are saying	Processing. C	3.83
30	I listen to key words which seem to carry most of the meaning	Processing. C	4
31	I predict what the other person will say based on context, background knowledge or what has been said	Compensation. M	3.62
32	I ask the speaker to slow down, repeat or clarify if I do not understand	Social. M	3.87
33	I avoid translating what I hear word for word	Monitoring. C	3.62
34	I use speaker's tone of voice, gestures, pauses or body language as a clue to meaning	Compensation. M	3.7
35	If I am unsure about meaning I try to guess it	Compensation. M	3.87
36	I listen carefully to how native speakers pronounce the language (FL) I am trying to learn	Processing. C	4.45
	Average		3.82
	Number of Strategies used highly frequently		9

APPENDIX IV

Sl. No.	SPEAKING STRATEGIES	Cognitive(C)/ Metacog. (M)	N = 30
37	I repeat new language (FL) to myself in order to practice it	Memory. C	4.12
38	I seek out people with whom I can speak FL	Social. M	3.95
39	I plan in advance what I want to say	Planning. M	3.83
40	If I am corrected while I am speaking, I try to remember the correction and avoid making the same mistake again	Monitoring. C	4.29
41	I ask questions	Social. M	3.83
42	I do not worry about correctness as long as I can communicate the meaning	Affective. M	3.12

43	When I do not get the correct expression in FL, I translate it from my Mother Tongue	Monitoring. C	3.25
44	If necessary, I use gestures to convey my meaning and keep a conversation going	Compensation. M	3.25
45	I practice FL with other students	Social. M	3.95
46	If I do not know the vocabulary I want to use, I use similar words or phrases	Compensation. M	3.95
47	I try to pronounce FL like the native speakers	Monitoring. C	4
	Average		3.78
	Number of Strategies used highly frequently		8

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