

English Language Learning Strategies used by Female ESL Learners of Vellore district – An Empirical Study

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Abstract

Objectives: This study attempts to examine the Language Learning Strategies (LLS) used by female ESL learners hailing from the rural areas of Vellore district. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** The data for this research were provided by 200 tertiary level female students from various women colleges across the district. These students' strategy use was documented using Oxford's questionnaire, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Descriptive statistics was run in STATA (V 13.0) to find out the overall strategy use and the relationships between strategy use, language proficiency and medium of instruction. **Findings:** The results showed that the learners were high strategy users with meta-cognitive strategies being mostly used and compensation, the least. It was also observed that those learners who used meta-cognitive strategies scored above 80% in their English exams. Medium of instruction had no significant difference in the choice of strategies. **Applications/Improvements:** The paper concludes with recommendations for strategy instruction and inculcation of these strategies into the regular classroom.

Keywords: Female learners, Language Learning Strategies, Language Proficiency, Second Language, SILL

1. Introduction

English, being one of the official languages in India, is a major communication tool in an academic setting. Owing to its status and prominence, educationists are taking steps to find out ways in order to aid learners develop communicative competence. In spite of English being the second language of our country and in most of the educational institutions, communicating in proper English has been a big challenge for most of the Indian students hailing from the rural areas. This eventually affects their dreams of securing a good job in the ever growing competitive ladder. Thus, there is a need for research on ways to enhance the language skills for such struggling students.

The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has witnessed varied dimensions of changes in pedagogy right from Grammar Translation (GT) method. One of the major contributions to the pedagogy in the early 1970s was LLS. The pioneering research on LLS¹ led to the discovery of certain characteristics and strategies employed by good language learners. This was subsequently followed

by other researchers like^{2,4} and so forth who researched into the deeper and wider perspectives of LLS. Thus, LLS started gaining momentum, and its significance in influencing the language learning process has been proved in several studies.

Various definitions and classifications of LLS have come into being through the contribution of several researchers. Though most of them are rather similar, this study uses Oxford's definition and classification as it is considered to be comprehensive in nature. According to Oxford, LLS are the "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning faster, more enjoyable, more effective and more transferrable to new situations¹." Oxford gave importance to the communicative aspect of the language and divided the strategies into two major categories, direct and indirect strategies. The direct strategies were further subdivided into memory, cognitive and compensation, and indirect into meta-cognitive, affective and social. Memory strategies aid in storage and retrieval of information. Cognitive strategies help in comprehension and production of a language. Compensation strategies assist

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learners to use language though they lack knowledge⁵. Those strategies that “help learners exercise ‘executive control’ through planning, arranging, focusing, and evaluating their own learning,” are known as meta-cognitive strategies¹. Affective strategies help learners control emotions and attitudes during learning; and, social strategies enable the learners to interact with others⁵. Oxford’s book, “Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know” is believed to be a milestone to the researchers of LLS. This book includes a questionnaire, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which is being profusely used in a number of studies related to the field. The present study also uses this questionnaire to record the LLS of the learners.

A lot of research has been done on the pattern of strategy use as well as the other factors affecting it⁴⁻¹⁰. In the researches done^{11,12} it was seen that there was a significant correlation between proficiency level and the use of strategies. The learners with higher proficiency levels were found to use strategies more frequently. Studies conducted^{13,14}, in the EFL context, on the Iranian students reported that the students were high to medium level strategy users. In both the cases the most used strategy was meta-cognitive and the least used were memory and affective strategies.¹⁵, in a study on the Hong Kongers, observed that the students were medium level strategy users with compensation strategies used more frequently and memory and affective strategies the least.

¹⁶studied the use of LLS in the Indian context and reported that the learners were high level strategy users. The most used strategy group by these learners were meta-cognitive and cognitive, while the least used were memory and affective. The study also reported gender difference in strategy use, where females used strategies more frequently than their male counterparts. Hence, through previous research, it is evident that LLS aid learners learn a second language in an effective way. This learner-centered pedagogy has paved way to make learners aware of the type of strategies they use while learning. In addition, with sufficient knowledge about the use of LLS from the facilitators, the students themselves can learn to monitor their own progress and improve their language proficiency to a great extent⁴. Thus, it is important to make these students aware of the LLS available and make them use it appropriately in related contexts.

As previous studies on LLS show a deficit of research in the ESL contexts, and other cultural background of the learners, it is necessary to extend the area of research to ESL contexts too, to obtain a comprehensive

understanding of the use of LLS. The following are the objectives of this study,

1. To identify the overall strategies used by the female students while learning a second language
2. To find the commonly employed direct and indirect strategies by these students
3. To find relationship between English proficiency and LLS, if any

2. Methodology

Based on the objectives of the study the following research questions were framed,

1. What is the current pattern of LLS employed by the female ESL learners in Vellore district?
2. Is there a relationship between LLS and Language proficiency of the female ESL learners?
3. Is there any significant relationship between SILL and medium of instruction among the female ESL learners?

2.1 Participants

The subjects for this study were chosen from the various Arts and Science Women Colleges in the Vellore district. These students were first year Under Graduates, with different majors, enrolled in a Foundation English course that was a part of their degree. Their age ranged from 17 to 20. Through simple random sampling technique, 200 students were involved in the survey study.

2.2 Instruments used

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire (Version 7.0),¹ was adopted and used in this study. Necessary modifications were made according to the context and comprehension of the students. This is a self-report questionnaire that has already been widely used in a number of studies due to its high reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.93 to 0.98). This SILL questionnaire, which has been categorized into six groups of strategies, consists of 50 questions. The six strategy groups are memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies.

2.3 Data Collection Method

The SILL questionnaire was distributed to the 200 female respondents of different subject majors in a regular

classroom. They were given a brief explanation of what the survey was about and all the queries were clarified. As most of the students were unable to comprehend the questions, the researchers had to translate the same into the vernacular to obtain proper answers. Later, the data collected were analyzed using the statistical package, STATA 13.0.

3. Results and Discussion

The following are the outcomes of the analyses carried out by the researchers,

1. *What is the current pattern LLS employed by the female ESL learners in Vellore district?*

The data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed using STATA 13.0. The frequency of use of strategies in terms of the six categories and overall use are illustrated below.

¹The use of strategies is said to be of low frequency if the mean value ranges from 1.0 to 2.4, of medium frequency if the mean value ranges from 2.5 to 3.4 and of high frequency if it ranges from 3.5 to 5.0. Table 1 shows that the mean of overall strategy use of the female ESL learners was 3.63 with a standard deviation of 1.20. This indicates that these learners are high level users of strategies.

In addition, meta-cognitive strategies were found to be the most used strategy category followed by social, affective and cognitive, while compensation was the least used. Similar high use of meta-cognitive strategies was also found in a number of researches conducted in other ESL/EFL contexts^{12,16-18}. However, the least use of compensation strategies seem to be inconsistent with the previous studies in that they showed least affinity towards affective or memory strategies rather than compensation strategies^{17,17-19}.

Table 1. Overall strategy use of the respondents

Strategies	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Memory	200	3.56	1.21	5
Cognitive	200	3.58	1.22	4
Compensation	200	3.47	1.22	6
Meta-cognitive	200	3.82*	1.11	1
Affective	200	3.68	1.19	3
Social	200	3.69	1.23	2
Overall strategy use	200	3.63	1.20	

The results of the overall strategy use demonstrated that the female ESL learners of Vellore district make high use of strategies. Though these learners use strategies at a high level, they are unsuccessful because of the lack of awareness to use strategies in context specific situations. Thus, strategy training should be considered to enable students to take full potential of these strategies. Also, in terms of strategy categories meta-cognitive strategies were used at a high level by these students. This could be due to their socio-economic background, which leads to the lack of ability to pick up the language unconsciously, and hence, they sort to conscious steps like planning, organizing and evaluating.

Compensation strategies were found to be the least used by the female ESL learners. These strategies are used in order to compensate one's lack of knowledge like using synonyms, guessing, using gestures and so forth. The reason for the less use of these strategies could possibly be their lack of awareness in how, where and when to use the strategies.

2. *Is there a relationship between LLS and Language proficiency of the female ESL learners?*

Descriptive statistics was run in order to find a possible relationship between strategy use and the learners' proficiency level, if any. The results of the same are demonstrated in Table 2. It was observed that learners who used meta-cognitive strategies followed by social and affective (mean = 4.14) more frequently had scored above 80% in English.

Discussion

Table 2 shows the results of the relationship between strategy use and language proficiency. It is found that the learners who used more of meta-cognitive strategies had

Table 2. SILL vs. Language Proficiency

Percentage of marks in English	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Meta-cognitive	Affective	Social
Below 40% (N = 13)	3.68	3.70	3.51	3.81	3.90	3.67
41-50% (N = 39)	3.67	3.68	3.54	3.89	3.71	3.73
51-60% (N = 52)	3.48	3.43	3.41	3.71	3.53	3.68
61-70% (N = 52)	3.50	3.65	3.43	3.87	3.71	3.71
71-80% (N = 32)	3.53	3.53	3.48	3.74	3.65	3.54
Above 80% (N = 12)	3.76	3.58	3.53	4.14*	3.91	3.96

scored above 80% in English. As meta-cognitive strategies help to manage one's overall learning process, it results in effective academic outcomes. Those who are able to plan, gather materials, organize, monitor and evaluates one's learning process are found to be successful in achieving language proficiency. Thus, this finding indicates the necessity of meta-cognitive strategies and the subsequent steps needed to inculcate it in the language classroom.

3. Is there any significant relationship between SILL and medium of instruction among the female ESL learners?

The results of descriptive analysis, which was run to find out if there was any relationship between LLS and the medium of instruction, reported that there wasn't much significant outcomes i.e. learners from both English medium and Tamil medium seemed to use almost the same kind of strategies. The same is listed in Table 3.

Table 3. SILL vs. Medium of instruction

Medium of High School	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Meta-cognitive	Affective	Social
English (N = 67)	3.41	3.49	3.28	3.79	3.52	3.53
Tamil (N = 128)	3.64	3.62	3.57	3.85	3.77	3.78

Discussion

The results in Table 3 show the relationship between language learning strategies and the medium of instruction. It is evident that there was not much difference found between the learners from Tamil medium and learners from English medium in the use of strategies. This could probably be due to the similar, out-dated teaching methods followed in the schools they had studied. This can be overcome with relevant training given to the learners as well as the teachers about the potential of LLS and how they can be used in specific contexts.

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the use of LLS by the female students of Vellore district. These findings provide information to the teachers to give necessary attention to the strategies. Also, educationists should take into consideration that every individual is different from the other and that their socio-economic background, medium of instruction in school days and language proficiency play an important role in the process of second language learning. It is important for

an instructor to focus on individual needs and cater to them accordingly in order to bring about significant results. Thus, required considerations should be given while designing curriculum or training programs for these students.

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