

## Language Learning Strategies of Turkish University EFL Students

### Türk Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Dil Öğrenme Stratejileri

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#### Abstract

This study examines the reported language learning strategy use of 187 university students learning English as a foreign language in Turkey using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). First the reported means for the six categories of language learning strategies of two groups of learners at different proficiency levels were calculated to find the rank ordering of use. These means were then compared across the two groups using the independent t-test to determine any significant differences in terms of language proficiency level. The findings were interesting in that, unlike similar studies, the lower proficiency group reported significantly more frequent use of metacognitive strategies than the higher proficiency group. While metacognitive and compensation strategies were the most frequently reported by both groups; affective strategies were reported the least, concurring with the findings of other studies.

*Key words:* SILL, language learning strategies, language proficiency

#### Öz

Bu çalışmada, Türkiye'de yabancı dil olarak İngilizceyi öğrenen 187 üniversite öğrencisinin kullandığı dil öğrenme stratejileri, Oxford'un (1990) Dil Öğrenme Strateji Envanteri (SILL) uygulanarak ölçülmüştür. İlk önce, kullanım sırasını bulmak için, farklı dil düzeyine sahip iki grup öğrencinin, dil öğrenme stratejilerinden altı kategorinin kullanım ortalamaları hesaplanmıştır. Dil düzeyi açısından anlamlı fark olup olmadığını tespit etmek için, karşılıklı iki grup arasındaki ortalamalar bağımsız t-test kullanılarak karşılaştırılmıştır. Elde edilen bulgulara göre, benzer çalışmaların aksine, daha düşük dil seviyesine sahip öğrencilerin, daha yüksek dil seviyesine sahip öğrencilerden daha sık bilişötesi stratejileri kullandıkları görülmüştür. Bilişötesi ve telafi stratejilerinin her iki grup tarafından en sık kullanıldığı görüldükçe, diğer çalışmaların sonuçlarının da gösterdiği gibi duyuşsal stratejilerin en az kullanıldığı tespit edilmiştir.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* SILL, dil öğrenme stratejileri, dil düzeyi

#### Introduction

Language learning strategies have become popular in ELT in recent years because of the findings of cognitive language learning theory that assumes humans as processors of information. Language learning strategies can be described as "the techniques actually used to manipulate the incoming information and, later to retrieve what has been stored" (Wenden, 1987: 6). Wenden summarises research in this area in order to

answer the following four questions: What do learners do to learn a foreign language? How do they self-direct these efforts? What do they know about which aspects of their learning process? How can their learning skills be refined?

However, despite the prolific research in the area, it has been difficult for researchers to come to a consensus on a definition of language learning strategies due to their elusive nature. Bialystok in 1978 (cited in O'Malley et al., 1985: 559) calls them "optional means for exploiting available information to improve competence in a second language". Tarone (1983, cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997: 2) refers to them as "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic

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competence in the target language...to incorporate these into one's interlanguage competence". Ellis (1985, cited in LoCastro, 1994: 409) describes them as "the means by which learners internalise L2 rules". According to Rubin (1987: 23), language learning strategies "contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly". O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 1) call them "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information". Oxford (1990: 1) refers to learning strategies as "steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Finally, Nyikos (1996: 111) calls them "deliberate steps taken by learners to make learning easier and retrieval more efficient through playful approaches".

Just as there are many definitions of learning strategies, so there are several classification systems. In fact, much of the early research in this field set out to identify and classify the strategies that learners reported to use. The system that will be discussed in this study is that of Oxford (1990: 14-22), which is perhaps the most comprehensive classification system to date. Oxford's system divides strategies into two major classes: direct and indirect. These two classes are divided again into six subgroups: the direct class into memory, compensation, and cognitive; the indirect class into metacognitive, social, and affective.

For the purpose of this study, the discussion of research carried out in this field will be limited to that dealing with Oxford's classification. Park (1997) set out to determine the relation between language learning strategies, as measured by the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990), and language proficiency, as measured by the Test Of English as a Foreign Language, for Korean university students. The results show a linear relation, with students of higher proficiency reporting more frequent language learning strategy use than those of lower proficiency. Griffiths (2003) used the inventory to determine the relationship between course level and the reported strategy use of international adult students at a private language school in New Zealand, finding that higher level students reported a significantly more frequent use of a wider range of strategies than did the

lower level students. She also found that lower level students preferred strategies that would help them with the memorisation of language, whereas the higher level students preferred more sophisticated strategies related to interaction. Griffiths and Parr (2001) also used Oxford's SILL to compare which strategies language learners claim they use with teachers' perceptions of students' use of language learning strategies. In their study, they adopted the SILL in order to gather data from the teachers. The results show striking differences between the perceptions of students and teachers.

Lo Castro (1994), however, argues that although the SILL is designed to be used in both EFL and ESL settings, the items on the inventory are biased in favour of the latter. She therefore calls for further research to be done on the SILL in a wide range of different cultural settings in which English is being taught as a foreign language.

In the light of the above research, the following study was carried out to find the answers to two questions. First, what the order is of the rate of reported language learning strategy category use for two groups of Turkish university EFL students at different levels of language proficiency Second, if there are any significant relations between the means of each category of language learning strategy across these two groups.

## Method

### *Subjects*

The subjects were 187 students attending a one-year English as a foreign language course at the Foreign Language Preparatory School, of Gazi University, Ankara, as a requirement before commencing full-time studies in various faculties of the same university. At the beginning of the course, the students were given a placement test and then assigned to one of four groups, A, B, C, or D, according to the results of this test. Students in group A go on to study at the Department of English Language Teaching, while students in the remaining groups continue to study in the Faculties of Medicine, Engineering and Architecture, Economics and Administration, Communication, and Technical Education.

Of the 187 subjects who took part in this study, 96 were from Group B, and 91 from Group D, the former

being of higher proficiency in accordance with the placement test administered. Group B students receive 20 hours a week of instruction during both semesters, and follow the Cutting Edge series (Sarah Cunningham and Peter Moor, Longman) from elementary to upper-intermediate level. Group D students receive 30 hours a week of instruction during the first semester, and then 25 hours a week during the second. In addition to the Cutting Edge series, they follow the True Colours course (Jay Maurer and Irene E. Schoenberg, Longman) at basic level.

Of the Group B students, 58% were male and 42% female; 21% had graduated from a state high school, 75% from an Anatolian high school (a type of state school which conducts instruction through the medium of English), and 4% from a private high school conducting instruction through the medium of English; 41% were to go on to study at the Faculty of Economics and Administration, 35% at the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, 18% at the Faculty of Technical Education, and 6% at the Faculty of Medicine. As for the Group D students, 84% were male while 16% were female; 81% had graduated from a state high school, 17% from an Anatolian high school, and 2% from a private high school conducting instruction through the medium of English; 57% were to go on to study at the Faculty of Technical Education, 25% at the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, 13% at the Faculty of Economics and Administration, 3% at the Faculty of Communications, and 1% at the Faculty of Medicine. Due to rounding down, these figures do not add up to one hundred.

#### *Instrumentation*

The instrument administered in this study Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) (Oxford, 1990). The SILL was translated into Turkish before administration to avoid errors arising from language proficiency. Cronbach's alpha for the SILL used in this study was 0.89.

The subjects were also asked to complete four background questions to determine to which group they had been assigned, their gender, from which type of high school they had graduated, and in which faculty they were to continue their full-time studies.

The SILL is a self-report questionnaire of 50 five point Likert-scale items designed to measure the frequency of use of language learning strategies, ranging from 1 (never, or almost never true) to 5 (always, or almost always true). The items are divided into six categories: *memory* strategies for storing and retrieving information; *compensation* strategies for overcoming lack of knowledge in language; *cognitive* strategies relating to how students think about their learning; *metacognitive* strategies for managing the learning process; *affective* strategies for regulating emotions, motivation and attitudes during learning; and *social* strategies for sharing learning experiences with others.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The SILL was administered during class with the cooperation of the English teachers responsible for each of the groups. The students were reminded that there were no correct or incorrect answers on the SILL and that their responses would not be included as part of their final assessment.

The analysis of the data was carried out using the SPSS statistical programme (version 9.0). For the first research question, the means of frequency of use for each of the six categories of language learning strategies and the total language learning strategies for group B and D were calculated. For the second research question, independent t-tests were conducted to compare the means of the six categories and total strategy use across the two groups.

#### *Results*

The descriptive statistics and results of the independent t-tests are given in Table 1. An examination of the data reveals that both groups report using each category at a medium level (defined by Oxford (1990: 300) as a range between 2.5 and 3.4) with means ranging from 2.52 to 3.36 and 2.68 to 3.29 for groups B and D respectively. Students in group B report a preference for compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, social strategies, cognitive strategies, memory strategies and affective strategies, in order of most frequent to least frequent use. The order reported by group D students is

strikingly similar, the only difference being a preference for metacognitive strategies over compensation strategies.

The results of the independent t-test show that there is no significant difference between the overall strategy use of the two groups. Significant differences were found between the reported means of memory strategies in favour of group D; compensation strategies in favour of group B; and metacognitive strategies in favour of group D.

Table 1.  
*Differences between the six strategy categories for*

Category	Group	Mean	SD	t	p
Memory	B	2.56	0.50	-2.76	0.006*
	D	2.79	0.61		
Cognitive	B	2.80	0.49	-0.56	0.572
	D	2.84	0.52		
Compensation	B	3.36	0.60	2.78	0.006*
	D	3.09	0.72		
Metacognitive	B	2.98	0.71	-2.79	0.006*
	D	3.29	0.79		
Affective	B	2.52	0.60	-1.63	0.104
	D	2.68	0.74		
Social	B	2.88	0.77	-0.041	0.967
	D	2.89	0.85		
Total	B	2.83	0.44	-1.35	0.176
	D	2.93	0.51		

\*p<0.05

### Discussion

The findings show that two groups of Turkish university EFL students at different levels of language proficiency report a high frequency use of metacognitive and compensation strategies and a low occurrence of affective strategies. Similar findings were reported by Park (1997) and Griffiths and Parr (2001).

It is interesting to note that while metacognitive strategies and compensation strategies take the first two places in both groups their order is different, with a significant difference in favour of group D for the former. This is contrast with the findings of earlier studies on the language learning strategy use of learners at lower proficiency levels which suggest that such learners tend not to be aware of how to monitor and evaluate their learning (O'Malley and Chamot 1990). This could be explained by the fact that students in group D receive at least ten hours a week more instruction than those in group B and they are expected to reach the same proficiency level at the end of the academic year. Therefore, they could feel more pressure to think about how to improve their learning.

While compensation strategies are ranked high by both groups, a significant difference is seen in favour of the more proficient students. Compensation strategies include coining new words and phrases, predicting and guessing the meanings of unknown words when reading. Such strategies involve manipulation of language, which Griffiths (2003), who found similar results, defines as being more sophisticated.

While memory strategies appear low down, second from the bottom in both groups, there is a significant difference between their means in favour of group D. This concurs with Griffiths' (2003) findings showing that learners at lower proficiency levels generally report more use of memory strategies than those at higher levels, probably because they initially need to find ways of dealing with new language input.

The fact that affective strategies appear at the end of the list in both groups could be due to the cultural and social background of the students. Because they tend to be introverted and they are not brought up to be in tune with their emotions, the low placement of affective strategies is not an unexpected outcome.

Griffiths (2003) found overall strategy use of more advanced learners to be significantly more frequent than that of elementary learners. However, her study was conducted with learners originating from different cultural backgrounds. The lack of significance difference between both groups' reported overall strategy use in this study could be explained by the fact

that the students come from the same cultural and educational background. They receive exactly the same training from teachers with similar training backgrounds using exactly the same material. The physical conditions of the learning environment and the number of students in each class are also identical.

### Conclusion

The current study investigated the overall reported language strategy use of Turkish university EFL students at two different proficiency levels. The results showed that while students in the more advanced group reported to use compensation strategies the most frequently; the elementary students reported more frequent use of metacognitive strategies. There were also significant differences between the reported uses of metacognitive and memory strategies in favour of the elementary students; and of compensation strategies in favour of the more advanced students.

There are several implications which can be drawn from this study. First, independent t-tests were applied to the data because the subjects were grouped according to a qualitative variable: the level of proficiency. Further studies could correlate reported frequencies of language learning strategy use with a quantitative variable, such as scores on a placement test requiring the application of multiple regression analysis, which would yield much more sensitive data.

Second, the research could be extended to compare reported frequencies of language learning strategy use with achievement by correlating the mean frequencies of each category with student achievement scores on quizzes and tests throughout the semester. The data analysed were the reported overall mean uses of strategies. In order to be able to determine a relationship between strategy use and individual achievement during the course, it would be useful first to divide the users of each category into three groups: high, medium and low. The scores of the achievement tests of the high and low users could then be correlated with the reported strategy use of each category both to determine if a relationship exists and to investigate which category might be more determinative of achievement.

Third, in this study language learning strategies have been examined in categories. The data obtained could be further investigated to discover reported use of individual strategies and their relation to language proficiency level and achievement. It must also be remembered that the SILL consists of only 50 items and that students may actually be using many more strategies that are not included on the inventory. More detailed research in the form of case studies involving interviews with reported high and low users would be valuable in shedding more light on language learning strategy use by Turkish students.

Finally, strategy inventories can only tell us what learners think they use, not whether they use them appropriately. However, report of frequent strategy use does not necessarily lead to success in foreign language learning (Vann and Abraham, 1990). The important thing is that learners be guided to use appropriate strategies effectively. For this, the existing course material could be supported by extensive embedded strategy training over the academic year. The teachers would also need training on how to teach strategy use, which could be given by means of in-service training. Moreover, since Griffiths and Parr (2001) report a difference between student and teacher perception of strategy use, strategy inventories should be given to both students and teachers, and be supported by student interviews to raise awareness about strategy use.

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