

Language Learning Strategies and Foreign Language Achievement

Dil Öğrenme Stratejileri ve Yabancı Dil Başarısı

Mustafa Zülküf Altan
İnönü Üniversitesi

Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between language learning strategies and foreign language achievement. Language learning strategies were measured by the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, 7.0 ESL/EFL Version), and the foreign language achievement was determined using the mid-semester course grade averages for 21 ELT students attending the English Preparatory class of the ELT Department. The findings of the study are: (1) the relationship between language learning strategies and foreign language achievement was linear; (2) among the categories included in the inventory only compensation for missing knowledge and the total language learning strategies were significantly correlated with the foreign language achievement as measured by the mid-semester course grade averages and (3) among the categories only compensating for the missing knowledge was predictive of the foreign language achievement accounting for 21 percent of the total variation in the achievement scores.

Key Words: Language learning strategies, foreign language achievement

Öz

Bu makale dil öğrenme stratejileri ve yabancı dil başarısı arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaktadır. Dil öğrenme stratejileri, Dil Öğrenme Stratejileri Envanteri (SILL, 7.0 ESL/EFL versiyonu) kullanılarak tespit edilirken, yabancı dil başarısı, İngilizce Öğretmenliği Bölümü hazırlık sınıfına devam eden 21 öğrencinin dönem arası sınavlarının ortalaması alınarak tespit edilmiştir. Çalışmanın sonuçları: (1) Dil öğrenme stratejileri ile yabancı dil öğrenme başarısı arasındaki ilişki doğrusaldır, (2) envanterdeki kategoriler içinde, sadece "bulunmayan bilgiyi kompanse etme" ve dil öğrenme stratejileri toplamı belirgin olarak yabancı dil başarısı ile anlamlı bir ilişki içerisindedir, (3) kategoriler içinde, sadece "bulunmayan bilgiyi kompanse etme", başarı notlarındaki toplam varyasyonun %21'ini oluşturarak yabancı dil başarısını tahmin etmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dil öğrenme stratejileri, yabancı dil başarısı

Introduction

Foreign or second language (L2) learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use often consciously to improve their progress in understanding, internalizing, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990). These behaviors are goal-oriented, open to change, and can be both observable and non-observable (Wenden 1987). Thus, the conscious and tailored use of language learning strategies may

facilitate language achievement and proficiency (Oxford, Park-OH , Ito and Sumrall , 1993).

Since the first attempts at defining the characteristics of good language learners (Rubin, 1975; Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern and Todesco, 1978; Ramirez, 1986; Reiss, 1985), research on language learning strategies has multiplied on the theoretical foundations of language learning strategies in terms of cognitive, metacognitive, memory, affective, compensating, and social theories and strategy training (Bialystok, 1981; Politzer, 1983; Wenden, 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Nyikos and Oxford, 1993; Chamot, 1993).

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Mustafa Zülküf Altan, İnönü Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, Yabancı Diller Eğitim Bölümü, Malatya. e-mail: mzaltan@inonu.edu.tr

There are both supporting studies reporting that language learning strategies are related to L2 proficiency/achievement (Chamot and Kupper 1993; McGroarty and Oxford 1990; Oxford and Nyikos 1989; Philips 1991, Wharton, 2000) and disputing studies reporting that language learning strategies are not related to some of the L2 achievement/proficiency measures that were examined (Politzer and McGroarty 1985; Mullins, 1992 as cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995). For example Politzer and McGroarty (1985) report that there is no relationship between three types of learning behaviors-classroom, individual, and interaction-and four types of proficiency gains- the Plaister Aural Comprehension Test (Plaister and Blatchford, 1971), the Comprehensive English Language Test for Speakers of English as a Second Language (Harris and Palmer 1970), a discrete-point communicative competence test, and a global communicative competence test - except for the significant relationship between interaction behaviors and a global communicative competence test. These results raise some very serious questions, such as whether there is a relationship between language learning strategies and foreign language proficiency. Are some strategies more related to foreign language proficiency than others?

According to research from the last two decades, the strategy inventory for language learning (SILL), developed by Oxford (1990), appears to be the only language learning strategy instrument that has been extensively checked for reliability and validity in multiple ways (Oxford and Burry, 1993).

In spite of the increasing popularity of research on the relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency level and training students on language learning strategies, the topic of language learning strategies has been neglected in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Turkey. Therefore, it is not difficult to say that students are not taught "learning how to learn."

It is assumed that research on language learning strategies of Turkish students could help these students learn "how to learn." could attract the attention of both Turkish teachers and researchers to the topic of language learning strategies, and supplement current research on such strategies. It is also believed that this study will be a support to Oxford and Burry-Stock's (1995,19)

concern regarding the importance of "getting more information on how students from different cultural backgrounds use language learning strategies".

Research Questions

This paper investigates the relationship between language learning strategies and foreign language proficiency as measured by the mid-semester course grade averages. For this purpose, three research questions are addressed:

1. Is there a relationship between language learning strategies and foreign language achievement? If so, is the relationship linear or curvilinear?
2. What are the correlations among six categories of language learning strategies, total language learning strategies and foreign language achievement?
3. Which categories of language learning strategies are more predictive of foreign language achievement?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects were 21 intermediate level ELT (English Language Teaching) students attending the preparatory English class at İnönü University, Turkey. They had been studying English for at least six years since middle school as a required course. The focus of the preparatory class was improving students' level of English in the four skills. Since the students are going to be English teachers, the program also aimed to teach students the notion of student centeredness by raising their awareness of factors affecting foreign language learning starting from the preparatory class. Fourteen of the students (66,7%) were female and seven students (33,7%) were male, ranging in age from 18 to 20, with an average age of 19. At the time of data collection, the subjects were studying the English language 25 class hours per week. Since the program is a newly opened one, there were 21 students in the program during the implementation of the study. Therefore, the size of the sample might seem rather small. However there have been similar studies done with very different number of subjects (see Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995).

In order to find the relationship between foreign language achievement and language learning strategies, the subjects were divided into three groups according to mid-semester course grade averages: low achievers (55-60, n=8), medium achievers (61-70, n=5), and high achievers (71 and above, n=8). The students get four achievement exams in a year. The passing score of the program is 70 % and the students should have an average of at least 60 in order to take the final exam at the end of the program.

In ESL/EFL SILL studies, language performance is measured in various ways including general language proficiency tests (Rossi-Le, 1989; Phillips, 1990; and Chang, 1991 as cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Phillips, 1991; Park, 1994 as cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995), oral language proficiency tests (Chang, 1991 as cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995), grades in language course (Mullins, 1991), language achievement tests directly related to course content (Oxford and Burry, 1993, 1995) proficiency self ratings (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989), and professional language career status (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). In this study language achievement tests directly related to course content were used. Since the tests included sections on four skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening, it is believed that using students' course scores as an achievement scale would be more meaningful for comparison with students' use of language learning strategies.

Instrumentation

Apart from the course scores, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, EFL/ESL Version, 7.0) was used in this study.

In order to measure the variety and frequency of students' use of language learning strategies, Oxford (1990) developed the structured self-report questionnaire, the SILL (EFL/ESL Version, 7.0). The SILL uses a choice of five-Likert-scale responses for each strategy described: never or almost never true of me, generally not true of me, somewhat true of me, generally true of me, and almost always true of me. Even though the reliability (.87-.96) and validity (.95) of the SILL have turned out to be high in many studies (Nyikos and Oxford, 1993; Oxford and Burry, 1993) it was .78 for this group of learners. As Oxford and Burry-Stock,

(1995) point out, the reliability of the ESL/EFL SILL goes down when the SILL is administered in the target language, English, rather than in the respondent's native language. They argue, "the reliability of the SILL administered in this manner contains somewhat more measurement error due to the confounding language effect" (p.7). The SILL contains items in six categories:

1. Memory strategies, such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, and structured reviewing (nine items).
2. Cognitive strategies, such as reasoning, analyzing, summarizing (all reflective of deep processing), as well as general practicing (14 items).
3. Compensation strategies (to compensate for limited knowledge), such as guessing meanings from the context in reading and listening and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning when the precise expression is not known (six items).
4. Meta-cognitive strategies, such as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one's progress, and monitoring error (nine items).
5. Affective (emotional, motivation-related) strategies, such as anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward (six items).
6. Social strategies, such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, and becoming culturally aware (six items).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection started towards the end of first semester of 1999-2000. The students were informed three days in advance that they would be taking the SILL on a certain day. They were also informed that the SILL is designed to help students understand better how they learn a new language and the information helps them become better learners. Students were also assured that the results for each student will not be publicly posted or shared with other students, will not be compared with the results of any other classmate, will not be used for grading or any negative purpose. Students were also reminded that there are no right or wrong answers. After explaining the nature of this study to the subjects, The researcher asked all the students who volunteered for this study to complete the forms. The students were allowed to finish the forms in an hour.

The analysis of the data was carried out on a PC using the SPSS statistical program version 8.0. In order to explore the results of this study fully, descriptive statistics for the six categories of language learning strategies, and the mid-semester average achievement scores were calculated. For research question 1, the subjects were divided into three groups according to their average mid-semester achievement scores: low, middle and high. After calculating the mean scores for the use of total language learning strategies for each of the three groups, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to identify any significant differences in the mid-semester scores among these three groups, followed by post-hoc tests when necessary. For research Question 2, (What are the correlations between the six categories of language learning strategies, total language learning strategies, and foreign language achievement?) Pearson-product moment correlations were used to investigate the relationships between the six categories of language learning strategies, total language learning strategies, and the mid-semester average achievement scores. For research Question 3, (Which categories of language learning strategies are more predictive of foreign language achievement?) a stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed to determine which categories of language learning strategies were more predictive of the mid-semester scores.

Results

The descriptive statistics for the variables-six categories of language learning strategies in order of mean magnitude, total language learning strategies, and the achievement scores are shown in Table 1.

As seen in Table 1, these ELT-major Turkish students used the six categories of language learning strategies—Social (Soc.), Cognitive (Cog.), Compensating (Com.), Metacognitive (Met.), Memory (Mem.), Affective (Aff.) strategies—and total language learning strategies at a medium level (means range from 2.83 to 3.55). Among the six categories of language learning strategies, these students used social, cognitive, and compensating strategies more frequently than metacognitive, memory, and affective strategies. In addition, they used social strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for the Strategy Categories (N=21)

Var.	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max
Soc. Str.	3.55	.47	2.66	4.50
Cog.Str.	3.52	.54	2.40	4.60
Com. Str.	3.37	.50	2.60	4.16
Met Str	3.24	.55	2.21	4.20
Mem. Str.	2.95	.54	2.00	4.11
Aff. Str.	2.83	.67	1.60	4.00
Total Str.	3.26	.38	2.64	3.98
Achv.	65.95	7.72	55.00	78.00

As mentioned above, in order to find the relationship between language achievement and language learning strategies, the subjects were divided into three groups according to their achievement scores: low achievers (55-60, n=8), medium achievers (61-70, n=5), and high achievers (71 and above, n=8) and then the mean scores of their total language learning strategies were calculated as presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Achievement Averages and the Strategy Mean Scores of the Three Achievement Groups

	Groups		
	Low (n=11)	Mid (n=6)	High (n=4)
Proficiency Mean	58.25	64.40	74.62
Strategy Mean	3.08	3.18	3.49

Achievement mean scores of these three groups were found to be significantly different from each other [$F(2,18)=90.911$; $P<0,01$]. According to the post-hoc Scheffe test, the strategy mean score of the high achievement group was significantly higher than that of the middle achievement group, and the strategy mean score of the middle achievement group was again significantly higher than that of the low proficiency group. In other words, the higher proficient the students are, the more language learning strategies they use.

The correlations among the six categories of language learning strategies, total language learning strategies, and the achievement scores were calculated and presented in Table 3. According to Table 3 compensating strategies

Table 3.
Correlations among the Six Categories of Language Learning Strategies, Total Language Learning Strategies, Total Language Learning Strategies, and the Achievement Scores

	Mem.	Cog.	Com.	Met.	Aff.	Soc.	Tll.
Mem	1.00						
Cog.	.56**	1.00					
Com.	.25	-.07	1.00				
Met.	.31	.55**	.02	1.00			
Aff.	.32	.25	.20	.36	1.00		
Soc.	.25	.65**	.00	.25	.25	1.00	
Tlls	.71**	.73**	.36	.77**	.57**	.50*	1.00
Achv	.35	.31	.50*	.37	.35	.08	.49

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

and the total language learning strategies were significantly related to the achievement scores.

A stepwise multiple regression was performed with the achievement scores as the criterion variable and the six categories of language learning strategies as predictor variables, in order to discover which categories of language learning strategies were more predictive of the achievement scores. The results are presented in Table 4.

As seen in table 4, only one predictor variable - compensating strategies - significantly accounted for 21 percent of the variance in the achievement scores. Because of its significant correlation with the achievement score, it is not surprising to note that only compensating strategies entered the equation.

Discussion

One of the main findings of this study is that the relationship between language learning strategies and

Table 4.
Stepwise Multiple Regression: Compensating Strategies on the Achievement Scores (N=21)

Var.	Cum. R ²	R ² Change	b	Beta	t
Com.	.25	.21	40.19	.50	3.88*

* $p < .05$

L2 achievement was linear, contradicting the findings of some other studies in which the relationship between these two variables was curvilinear (Green, 1991 as cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Phillips, 1991).

Another finding of this study is that among all six categories of language learning strategies, only compensating strategies along with the total language learning strategies were significantly correlated with achievement scores. This finding contradicts some research on language learning strategies, which has failed to show a relationship between language learning strategies and L2 achievement (Bialystok, 1981; Mullins, 1992 as cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Politzer and McGroarty, 1985). Acknowledging the importance of the quantity of strategy use in L2 proficiency, some researchers contend that appropriate use of language learning strategies might lead to improved L2 proficiency (Porte, 1988; Vann and Roberta, 1990).

A third finding of this study is that among the six categories of language learning strategy, only compensating strategies were more predictive of the achievement scores. This finding indicates the importance of guessing, using synonyms or gestures to express meaning of an unknown word or expression, tolerance of ambiguity, rational and reasonable inferences, overcoming knowledge gaps and continuing to communicate authentically in learning a foreign language. As Oxford and Burry (1995:18) say "language learning, more than almost any other discipline, is an adventure of the whole person, not just a cognitive or meta-cognitive exercise". We all know that good language learners are good guessers (Rubin, 1975). On the other hand, less effective language learners often tune out or refer to a dictionary to look up every unknown word, which of course in return destroys progress.

It is important to note that one of the students who had the lowest SILL Total score (2.64) had one of the highest scores for the category of Compensating for the missing knowledge (4.00) and had one of the highest proficiency scores (76). This student is noted for being at ease in the classroom environment, an effective speaker, writer, and an ever-ready risk taker in class. Since we know that compensation occurs not only in understanding the new language but also in producing it, compensation strategies allow learners to produce

spoken or written expression in the target language without complete knowledge. Therefore, it becomes obvious that less proficient language learners need these strategies more than other groups.

Compensation strategies for production also help learners to use the target language and obtain more practice. While some of the compensation strategies help learners' fluency, some others might help them to learn new information about appropriate things in the target language (Oxford, 1990). And such confidence, as mentioned above, can help learners communicate better than those who know a lot of words and structures in the target language.

Pedagogical Implications

All of the findings of this study - the linear relationship between language learning strategies and the achievement scores, significant correlations between one strategy category and the total SILL score, and the quite high prediction of one strategy category accounting for 21 percent of the total achievement score alone - provide evidence that language learning strategies are related to L2 achievement.

These findings suggest that strategy training be conducted in EFL classrooms to help learners take responsibility for their own learning and become autonomous L2 learners outside the classroom where they spend most of their time. Use of appropriate language learning strategies often result in improved proficiency or achievement overall or in specific skill areas (Oxford and Burry, 1993). It is believed that appropriate learning strategies that enhance independent learning should be developed during classroom instruction. Research has shown that teachers can train students to use better learning strategies (O'Malley, 1984; Wenden, 1991) and general guidelines about how to conduct strategy training are very well described in some studies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford 1990).

In spite of the increasing amount of research on language learning strategies and published guidelines about how to conduct them properly, it is rather difficult to say that strategy training has been very successful (Rees-Miller, 1993). The difficulty lies in when different learner characteristics exist and teachers cannot introduce language learning strategies that fit every student's individual learner characteristics. As a solution to this

situation, teachers need to identify more effective language learning strategies in their classrooms. Since compensating strategies were significantly related to the proficiency scores, compensating for the missing knowledge for this study, and focus on teaching these strategies to the students would be helpful in order to improve their proficiency. And this will lead the students to be better motivated to learn the strategies being focused on and use them more willingly and properly in L2 activities. Chamot and Kupper (1989), Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) provide helpful details on how to integrate language learning strategies into regular classroom events. Later on students can train themselves to improve their own strategies through a variety of self-help materials as suggested by Oxford (1990).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and L2 achievement. Since this relationship was identified through a self-report questionnaire of the SILL and L2 achievement measured by the tests based on the classroom activities, one should be very cautious in making generalizations based on the findings of this study. It should also be pointed out that the subjects were quite few in number to make generalizations. However, it helps us support Oxford and Burry's (1995) concern regarding the importance of learning how students from different cultural backgrounds use language-learning strategies.

This study shows that there is a significant linear relationship between language learning strategies and achievement scores, that only one category of language learning strategy was correlated significantly with the achievement score, and that compensating for the missing knowledge strategy was alone more predictive of the achievement score, accounting for 21 percent of the total variation in achievement score in this context. These empirical findings both verify some of the earlier results and contradict some other important findings and suggest further research in the following areas: (1) the nature of the relationship between language learning strategies and L2 achievement/proficiency, whether linear or curvilinear, needs to be investigated through other populations;(2) although one category of language

learning strategy alone accounted for 21 percent of the total variation in achievement scores, the variables that explain the rest of the of the variation in L2 achievement need to be investigated; (3) whether the significance of compensating strategy in predicting the proficiency score is specific to this group of Turkish students or general to other groups of Turkish learners and learners of different cultures.

The empirical findings provided in this study along with the findings to be gathered in response to the questions raised above might contribute to build a more consistent theory of language learning strategy use in L2 and accordingly help us to have a better picture of L2 acquisition theory, which researchers have been working on since the last millennium.

References

- Bialystok, E. (1981). The role of conscious strategies in second language proficiency. *Modern Language Journal*, 65, 24-35.
- Chamot, A.U. (1993). Student responses to learning strategy instruction in the foreign language classroom. *Foreign Language Annals*, 26, 308- 321.
- Chamot, A.U. & Kupper, L. (1989). Learning strategies in foreign language instruction. *Foreign Language Annals*, 22,13-24.
- Chamot, A.U. & Kupper, L. (1993). Learning strategies in foreign language instruction. *Foreign Language Annals*, 22, 13-24.
- Ehrman, M.E. & Oxford, R.L. (1989). Effects of Sex differences, career choice, and psychological type on adult language learning strategies. *Modern Language Journal*, 73, 1-13
- Harris, D. & Palmer, L. (1970). *CELT/A Comprehensive English Language Test for Speakers of English as a Second Language*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McGroarty, M. (1987). *Patterns of persistent second language learners: Elementary Spanish*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Miami, FL.
- McGroarty, M. & Oxford, R.L. (1990). Language Learning Strategies: An introduction and two related studies. In M. P. Amado, H.H.F. & C.M. Valdez (Eds.) *Foreign Language Education: Issues and Strategies*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Naiman, N., Frohlich, M., Stern, H.H. & Todesco, A. (1978). *The good language learner*. Toronto: Modern Language Center, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Nyikos, M. & Oxford, R.L. (1993). A factor analytic study of language learning strategy use Interpretations from information processing theory and social psychology. *Modern Language Journal*, 77, 11-22.
- O'Malley, J.M. (1984). *The effects of training in the use of learning strategies on learning English as a second language*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL), Houston TX.
- O'Malley, J.M. & Chamot, A.U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: C.U.P.
- Oxford, R.L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House.
- Oxford, R.L. & Nyikos, M. (1989). Variables affecting choice of language learning strategies by university students. *Modern Language Journal*, 73 (2), 291-300.
- Oxford, R.L. & Burry, J. (1993). *Evaluation, norming, factor analysis, and psychometric testing of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) throughout the world*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of National Council on Measurement in Education.
- Oxford, R.L., Park-OH, Y., Ito, S. & Sumrall, M. (1993). Factors affecting achievement in a satellite-delivered Japanese language program. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 7, 10 25.
- Oxford, R.L. & Burry-Stock, J. (1995). Assessing the use of language learning strategies worldwide with the ESL/EFL version of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). *System*, 23 (1), 1- 23.
- Phillips, V. (1991). A look at learner strategy use and ESL proficiency. *The CATESOL Journal*, November 57-67.
- Plaister, T. & Blatchford, C. (1971). *Plaister Aural Comprehension Test (PACT)*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, English Language Institute.
- Politzer, R. (1983). An exploratory study of self reported language learning behaviours and their relation to achievement. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 6, 54-65.
- Politzer, R. & McGroarty, M. (1985). An exploratory study of learning behaviours and their relationship to gains in linguistic and communicative competence. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 103- 124.
- Porte, G. (1988). Poor language learners and their strategies for dealing with new vocabulary. *ELT Journal*, 42, 167-172.
- Ramirez, A. (1986). Language learning strategies used by adolescents studying French in New York schools. *Foreign Language Annals*, 19, 131 141.
- Reiss, M. A. (1985). The good language learner: Another look. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 41 (3), 511-523.
- Rees-Miller, J. (1993). A critical appraisal of learner training: Theoretical bases and teaching implications. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 679-689.
- Rubin, J. (1975). What the good language learner can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, 9 (1), 41-51.
- Vann, R. J. & Roberta, G. A. (1990). Strategies of unsuccessful language learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 24, 177-198.
- Wenden, A. (1987). Incorporating learner trainer in the classroom, 159-168. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin, (Eds), *Learner Strategies in Language Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall
- Wenden, A. (1991). *Learner strategies for learner autonomy: planning and implementing learner training for language learners*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Wharton, G. (2000). Language learning strategy use of bilingual foreign language learners in Singapore. *Language Learning*, 50 (2), 203-243.

Geliş	31 Ekim 2002
İnceleme	11 Kasım 2002
Kabul	12 Mayıs 2003