

Review research paper

**LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES
AND ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF SHIVAJI UNIVERSITY
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

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Abstract. *The present study aimed to investigate the use of language learning strategies (LLS) by undergraduate students, the degree of use of language learning strategy included in the Oxford Taxonomy, and the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and English language proficiency. One hundred and forty-eight arts, commerce, science undergraduate students studying at various colleges affiliated to Shivaji University were the participants of the study. The results indicated that these students used LLS moderately to less; meta-cognitive strategies, social strategies, cognitive strategies, and memory strategies moderately; and compensation strategies and affective strategies were used less. The same correlation was found between the use of language learning strategies and English proficiency, which was indicated by students' grades in proficiency tests. Overall, the results demonstrate that the use of language learning strategies used by the selected students varies depending upon the proficiency level. It was observed that less proficient students used fewer strategies and proficient students used them more.*

Key words: *Language Learning Strategies, English Proficiency, Undergraduate students*

INTRODUCTION

India is a land of diversity with a plethora of cultures, traditions, religions, languages, etc. Due to this ethnicity, India today stands as one of the most prominent multilingual countries across the globe. To overcome language complications, Indians have been using English as a lingua franca exponentially. Over a while, English, once the language of rulers, has undergone a shift from a foreign language to a second language, thereby-increasing the interest among language learners to communicate in English effectively. The story of English in India (Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy, 2006) traverses through the journey of the English language and its multi-dimensions in India.

There exist various theories and approaches to teaching and learning English language. Stephen D Krashen, one of the prominent linguists from the US, while explaining the theories of second language acquisition, proposed the 'monitor model' (Krashen, 1982). According to this model, five major hypotheses play an important role in second

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language acquisition: acquisition-learning hypothesis, natural order hypothesis, monitors hypothesis, input hypothesis, and affective filter hypothesis. Affective filter is the dominant element that influences language learning at a higher rate. These affective filters include a negative attitude, mother tongue influence, old age factors, personality (introvert), low self-esteem, a higher level of anxiety, lack of motivation, etc. are some of the examples under affective filters. These elements retard the learners' ability to acquire a language by obstructing the comprehension of the input.

To overcome the negative factors that thwart the learning processes, learners incorporate certain strategies which are otherwise called 'Language Learning Strategies'. Language Learning Strategies (LLS) is a certain action or plan inculcated by a language learner to use the language more efficiently in a given situation.

DEFINING LLS

LLSs are defined as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Based on her classification system, Oxford (1990) designed a strategy assessment tool, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which is currently recognized as the most comprehensive and widely used instrument for identifying strategy preferences of language learners throughout the world (Bremner, 1999; Foong & Goh, 1997, Green & Oxford, 1995).

LLS can be simply defined as certain techniques, methods, tactics, actions, or behaviors used by a language learner to endorse the process of learning a second language or the target language. Using LLS, the efficiency of learning, productivity, performance, adaptability, language competence of a learner can be inflated and enhanced.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LLS

According to Oxford (1990), LLS is the specific actions that are taken by a language learner to overcome the difficulty in learning. They chiefly contribute to the main motto of language learning, that is, communicative competence. Using LLS, learners become more self-directed. This makes them analyze their self-incapability and rectify this gap using certain alternate techniques that are feasible to the learner. Strategies used are not always observable. The tactics used are influenced by a variety of factors such as situation, environment, prevailing knowledge, cognitive aspects, etc. LLS support learning in both direct and indirect manner. They are often conscious and can be taught to the students. LLS are problem-oriented and flexible. Most of the time, they enhance the role of a teacher in a classroom.

Nowadays, in the process of learning a second or foreign language, more emphasis is given on how teachers and learners achieve their mission than the techniques used in learning (Shinde and Shinde, 2018). LLS ease out language learning and endorse the processes of acquisition of language in terms of competence and performance. Some strategies that are used by learners are behavioral which means they can be observed and some others are mental processes that cannot be observed. LLS make the learner use the strategies accurately under proper guidance. It also depends upon the internal factors such as belief, sex, attitude, motivation, learning experience, etc., and external factors such as tasks, target language, conditions, etc. Strategies used by the learner can be single or multiple.

TYPES OF LLS

Numerous in-depth research studies have classified LLS in the recent past. The pioneers of LLS i.e., Wenden and Rubin (1987), Oxford (1990), Stern (1992), and Ellis (1994) promoted similar categorization of learning strategies without any major changes. - LLS can be divided into two broad categories according to Oxford (1990); Direct and Indirect Strategies.

Direct Strategies:

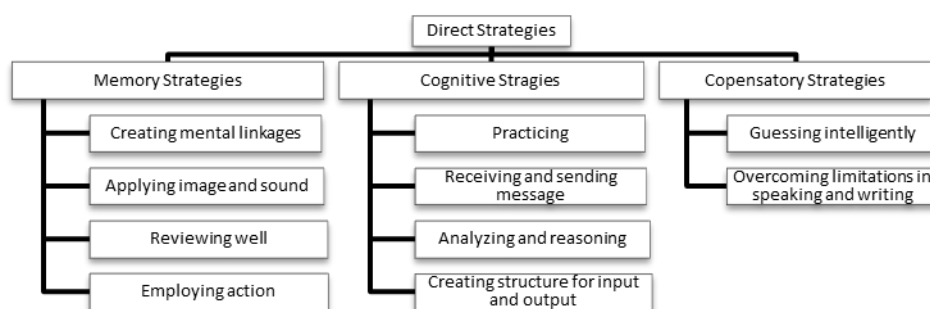


Chart 1 Direct Strategies

Direct strategies are the strategies that are directly involved in the process of the second or target language learning (Oxford, 1990). They deal with the cognitive process of learning language as it helps in retaining and reviewing the given inputs. They are quite beneficial for the students as they help in communicating even when there is a gap in terms of the learner's knowledge.

1. Memory Strategies:

Memory strategies work well in storing and retrieving provided information. This strategy is grounded on meaning-making since all the techniques adopted by learner under this strategy is about the association of meaning. Methods involved in memory strategies are an arrangement of things in order, reviewing, and making relations. This strategy helps in overcoming vocabulary problems. Under this strategy there are four subcategories; creating mental linkages, applying image and sound, reviewing, and employing actions. All these strategies are implemented during the initial process of language learning.

2. Cognitive Strategies:

The main function of Cognitive strategies is the transformation of target/second language by a learner. Drilling, repeating, summarizing, etc. are some of examples of this strategy. Cognitive strategies are further simplified into four subcategories: practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing, and reasoning creating a structure for input and output. These are adopted to comprehend the meaning and expression of the target language.

3. Compensation strategies:

This strategy acts as a filler in the process of language learning. Adopting these strategies, learners use the new language to understand and produce speech, irrespective of their limited knowledge. Thus, helping the learner to overcome the lack of grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, etc. This strategy can be further classified into two subcategories; guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing, coining new words, circumlocutions, choosing the topic, using memes, swapping to mother tongue, etc., are some of the techniques used under this strategy.

Indirect Strategies:



Chart 2 Indirect Strategies

Indirect strategies work hand in hand with direct strategies. These strategies tend to give indirect support to language learning by regulating the process. Using techniques like planning, developing an appropriate milieu, controlling anxiety, evaluating, focusing, etc., students can learn effectively (Oxford, 1990). Expressing one's opinion is the foremost important strategy under this category, which acts as feedback. Sharing feelings by students not only makes a teacher understand a learner but also introspect learning. According to Oxford (1990), indirect strategies can be classified into three main groups.

1. Metacognitive strategies:

Metacognitive strategies are strategies that refer to the technique used to help the learner to comprehend the way they acquire language. It means methods intended for students to 'think about their thinking'. These strategies are the "actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices, and which provide a way for learners to co-ordinate their learning process" (Oxford 1990, p.137). This method is used to overcome the ambiguous situations that are created during learning because of 'newness'; unfamiliar vocabulary, confusing words, rules, etc. This 'newness' makes the learners lose their focus while learning, which can be recovered only by the conscious use of metacognitive strategies. Paying attention, self-monitoring, self-evaluating, arranging, and planning to learn, etc., are some of the tactics under this strategy.

2. Affective strategies:

Affective strategies deal with managing emotions, attitudes, and motivations, both of which are positive and negative. Through affective strategies, learners can gain control over emotional

factors (Oxford, 1990). She also says that a good language learner is one who knows methods of controlling one's emotions and attitude toward learning. It incorporates ideas such as anxiety, motivation, risk-taking, self-esteem, tolerance for ambiguity, culture shock, inhibition, and attitudes. Lowering one's anxiety, meditation, rewarding oneself, using music while learning, encouraging oneself, etc., are some of the techniques under affective strategies.

3. Social strategies:

Social strategies refer to the communication aspect of the learner with the surroundings. It believes that a language is a form of social behavior. It is all about communication that occurs among people. Our surroundings or people act as a catalyst in the teaching-learning process. It gives rise to cultural understanding, comprehending one's perspective, reciprocating to one's feeling. These strategies establish a comfortable environment thereby increasing the group spirit among the learners. Co-operating with peers, empathizing with others, cultural understanding, asking for clarification, etc., are some of the techniques of social strategies.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the present scenario, knowing the English language is the very thing in the recruitment process and also in higher education sectors. Figuratively speaking, a person who has a great command of English is categorized under the elite class. If we look at the transition of the status of English in India from foreign to a second language, one can observe that this language is gaining momentum over a period of time and thus, shifting the focus from language learning to proficiency in the language.

According to the current market-driven utilitarian function, speaking English is not just sufficient. Rather, it demands proficiency in the language that is spoken, thereby increasing the scope for highly proficient English speakers. To have mastery over any language, incorporation of certain skills, tactics, shortcuts, planning, etc. play a vital role in the process of learning. These aspects which aid the efficiency of learning a second language can be grouped under Language Learning Strategies. Thus, it is very important to prepare the students as proficient English language speakers to meet the demands of the current global world.

In the process of second language learning, even though teacher uses common methodology for every student, there is a huge disparity in which students learn, comprehend, and retain the given information. Every student tends to grasp the given inputs differently based on the LLS that they incorporate throughout the process. Strategies thus selected influence the proficiency level of the students in second language learning. Hence this study is an attempt to analyze the correlation between LLS and English proficiency among undergraduate BA, B.Sc., and B.Com. students of Shivaji University, Maharashtra, India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaningful insights drawn from recent research studies highlight the importance of diverse mental skills used by learners in learning languages. These define learning strategies as specific

mental actions tending to make learning easier, autonomous, transferable, and effective to all communicative situations (Oxford, 1990). However, the learners vary in their abilities of storage, retrieval, and use of information affecting the level of language acquisition. Oxford also agrees that highly motivated learners efficiently use a maximum range of appropriate strategies in the learning of a non-native language (1990, p.36).

Rubin (1975), the pioneer of LLS defines strategies as “the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge” (p.43). It was seen that successful language learners urge to communicate, paid less importance to obstacles they faced by being courageous in a given situation. The strategies thus used were dependent on affective factors such as cultural differences, target language proficiency, age, situation, etc.

Wenden and Rubin (1987) inferred through their studies that the strategies involved in learning are functioning devices, steps, and procedures incorporated by the learners for the use of acquiring knowledge. Also, Richard and Platt (1992) in the research found that these learning strategies are similar to that of conscious mental abilities functioned by learners for comprehending new information.

A comprehensive and detailed study conducted by Oxford (1990), differentiated language learning strategies into two categories: direct strategies and indirect strategies. The language learning strategies that are directly involved in learning the target language are called direct strategies. These direct strategies require cognitive processing of the language (1990, p.37). These strategies are further grouped under three types, i.e., memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Whereas indirect strategies give indirect support through evaluating, planning, seeking opportunity, increasing cooperation, sympathy, and controlling anxiety (1990, p.151), indirect strategies are divided into three sets: metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

The recent study that was carried out by Al-Khaza'leh (2020) on English major students of Saudi Arabia, examined the relationship between academic weaknesses and preferred LLS incorporated by the learners. The results showed that these students used LLS at an average level which had a significant effect on their academic performance. It was inferred that learners tend to use social and metacognitive strategies more than any other memory strategies, as a result of their educational and cultural differences. He also claims that the strategies used by the learners are influenced by the factors such as age, life experience, gender, self-concept, motivation, etc., because of which it becomes inappropriate to accept that all the language learners use similar LLS.

Kunasaraphan (2015) held research on the first-year students of one of the colleges in Thailand, to know the types of LLS adopted by the students which affected their proficiency level. It was inferred that students used indirect strategies more than compared direct strategies. Students with high proficiency levels tend to behave differently in the process of learning. High-proficiency students used strategies such as cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies extensively. These strategies must be endorsed and adopted as principles to enhance low-proficiency students for the sake of improving the efficiency of language learning.

Zhao (2017) in his research explored the usage of LLS as a vital factor in the accomplishment of ESL and EFL learners. His study aimed at investigating the use of LLS by undergraduate students of Thailand and also to find the relationship between LLS and English proficiency. It was implied that EFL teachers must analyze the strategies used by high-proficiency language learners and train academically poor students to use those strategies to improve EFL proficiency. It was also observed that more use of LLS by the learners resulted in better performance.

A study was conducted by Patil and Karekatti (2012), on engineering students to analyze the types and degrees of LLS adopted by engineering students and also to examine the perception of the use of LLS in English language learning. They stress the need to train students in terms of using strategy to improve language skills. It was seen that the selection of strategies by the students was based on the tasks that were assigned.

Shinde S.M. and Shinde M.B. (2018) in their study on LLS used by engineering students conferred that since most of students tend to use metacognitive strategies in language learning, teachers must support the students to learn these strategies to design and organize learning even outside the classroom. So, to achieve this, there is a need to train students as well as teachers of ESP. They also urge to include LLS in the academic curriculum as a separate topic to enhance the efficiency of the learning process.

OBJECTIVES

Discerning the importance of LLS in the process of acquiring a second language, this research aims:

- To examine the types of language learning strategies students use while learning a language in the classroom and outside the classroom;
- To check the correlation between the use of language learning strategies and the English language proficiency of students.

METHOD OF COLLECTION OF DATA

Subjects of the present study were one hundred and forty-eight first/second/third year students from six undergraduate colleges (BA, BSc, B.Com) affiliated to Shivaji University, selected using simple random sampling method. Out of one hundred and forty-eight, ninety-nine were girls and thirty-two were boys. Ninety-two students were studying in their first year of the undergraduate program, twenty-one were doing their second year of graduation and thirty-six were in the third year.

INSTRUMENTS

The first instrument used in this study has two parts: the first part includes students' background information, including gender, year of graduation, etc., and the other part is a questionnaire based on the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL). It is a 50 item Version 7.0 for EFL/ESL developed by Oxford in 1989 (Oxford, 1990a). The second instrument, a proficiency test, was also prepared and administered to check selected students' proficiency.

Both instruments were shared through Google forms with the teachers teaching these undergraduate students. The instruments were sent to some college teachers randomly. To those teachers who showed their readiness and agreed to participate in the research, the researcher explained the instruments and discussed the purpose and relevance of the study. The participating teachers explained the instruments to their students and got them filled under their observation.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The data received was analyzed quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Table 1 below illustrates the LLS used by the students.

Table 1 Analysis of Students' Responses to the SILL

Strategies	SA/A	SD/D	U
Memory Strategies	64.64	20.72	14.64
Cognitive Strategies	64.82	22.97	12.21
Compensation Strategies	59.01	25.11	15.88
Metacognitive Strategies	69.37	20.12	10.51
Affective Strategies	58.00	26.58	15.43
Social strategies	65.43	24.55	10.02

SA- Strongly Agree, A- Agree, SD-Strongly Disagree, D- Disagree, U- Undecided

It indicated that the students actually used LLS moderately to less. They moderately used the metacognitive strategies (69.37%), followed by social strategies (65.43%), cognitive (64.82%), memory strategies (64.64%), and less used compensation strategies (59.01%) strategies, and affective strategies (58.00%). Around 20% to 26% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed to use any of these strategies. Moreover, around 10% to 15% of students could not decide on any of the options given.

Correlatively, the participants achieved an average performance in the proficiency test also (refer the diagram 1 below).

The analysis of the SILL and Proficiency Test showed that the students who positively replied to cognitive, metacognitive, affective, memory, and social strategies scored good grades in proficiency tests. On the other hand, those who replied negatively scored very poor grades. It showed that there is a correlation between students' use of LLS and their grades in proficiency test. This also shows that these students have relatively low knowledge of LLS and they have much scope to improve their proficiency in English.

The current findings showed that the participants used language learning strategies with moderate frequency. Indeed, these undergraduate learners appear to be medium language learning strategy users, in terms of Oxford (1990). The result is consistent with other studies investigating the frequency of LLS use in ESL learners in other contexts (Bonyadi et al., 2012; Habok, & Magyar, 2018; Hashim et al., 2018; Patil and Karekatti, 2012).

Though metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used strategies compared to other strategies, the percentage of using them was not significant. The participants' responses showed that some of their most common metacognitive strategies were finding ways to use English, looking for opportunities to read English content as much as possible, noticing their English mistakes and using that information to improve, working with friends who are good at English, ascertaining how to become better English learners, and thinking about their progress. Very few students actually knew about these strategies and very few used them.

The social strategy ranked second among the six categories of language learning strategies. Social strategies include asking questions, cooperating, and empathizing with others. For example, learning can be enhanced when people interact with each other to clarify a confusing point or when they participate in a group discussion or cooperative

learning group to solve a problem. With the communicative/cooperative language learning approach students acquire more; but only some of these students were aware of the importance of using them while communicating. It was found that some of the selected students help each other to acquire the language and they tend to seek help from each other without any hesitation. Moreover, these students rarely participate in English events or activities in which English is spoken. Indeed, the use of English remains minimal in day-to-day communications and outside the classroom.

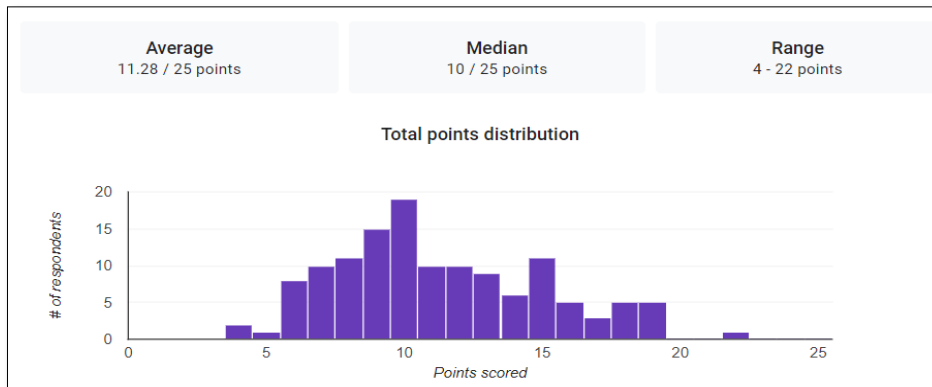
The cognitive strategies and memory strategies were used in the same proportion. They ranked third in the list. Writing or speaking new English words, practicing sounds of English, reading for pleasure in English, and looking for words in the mother tongue which are similar to English were the strategies used by these students frequently.

Memory strategies involve mental processes for storing new information in the memory and retrieving them when needed. Thinking of the relation between what is already known and new content, using words in sentences, reviewing English lessons often, and connecting sounds and images of English, words were the memory strategies most frequently used by these students. The current study also showed that memorization was also a less used strategy among Shivaji University students. The examination-oriented learning in Indian education system in India also influences the usage level of LLS among students. Students are more focused on getting excellent results or passing the exams; they are more likely to achieve their goals in exams, thus neglecting the language construction aspect. For these reasons, this situation has affected the selection and the use of LLS among students.

Compensation strategies were in the fourth position in the list of six strategies. These strategies allow learners to use the language to speak or write in English, even when their vocabulary is limited. For instance, the use of linguistic clues to guess the meaning or creating words based on linguistic clues may compensate for their lack of vocabulary. These strategies were also used less by these students. Such strategies were less used by Shivaji University learners to compensate for the missing knowledge in English due to a lack of vocabulary. Compensation strategies mostly help to continue the communication act with some alternatives, but as these students were unaware of these strategies, they do not use them.

Affective strategies were the least used strategies by these university students. Affective strategies help learners monitor their emotional behaviors, attitudes and motivation. For instance, affective strategies may be used to manage fears or to encourage themselves when their test scores are disappointing. Moreover, language learners might set their learning goals and reward themselves when the test scores are satisfying. However, this may be explained by differences in the learning condition and context to which students are exposed when acquiring the target language or differences in the measures of learning strategies used in different studies.

The results of this study are compatible with a number of previous SILL studies conducted in many countries, such as the U.S., Europe, and Asia, including Thailand (Anderson, 2005, Huang & Chen, 2009, Kato, 2005, Olah, 2006, & Prakongchati, 2007). More importantly, the findings of this study are consistent with the findings of many studies in which the higher English proficiency students employed a greater diversity and more frequency of English learning strategies than did the lower English proficiency students (Wu, 2008, Yang, 2010, & Zhao, 2009).



Graph 1 Students' performance in the Proficiency Test

Graph 1 showed the students' performance in proficiency test. It revealed that these students performed unsatisfactorily. Very few students (15%) could score grades between 15 to 20 out of 25. No student could score 100% marks in the proficiency test. The average score was 11.28, and median was 10.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study and a number of previous studies, it is concluded that students with higher English proficiency levels used language learning strategies more often, appropriately, and effectively, than those with lower English proficiency level. Similarly, Oxford (2003) and Yang (1999) stated that successful learners have the ability to organize and combine particular types of language learning strategies in effective ways, according to their own learning needs.

Successful learning does not only rely on teaching strategies; learners' use of LLS also contributes in completing classroom tasks and activities effectively. Therefore, the researchers pointed out that achievement in learning English depends on understanding and implementation of language learning strategies. The findings of the present study revealed that teachers teaching to UG classes should brief students on effective use of LLS so that the less successful learners will learn language effectively and become better language learners.

According to the findings of these studies, it can be concluded that students with high English proficiency behaved in unique ways in learning a language. Strategies, such as metacognitive, social, and cognitive, are typically used by high-achievement students. Such strategies should be continuously promoted and used as guidelines for enhancing less successful students of Shivaji University to improve the effectiveness of their English learning.

As Shinde Sunanda and Shinde Mahesh (2018) in their study on LLS used by engineering students convened to include LLS in the academic curriculum as a separate topic in the curriculum of Engineering studies to enhance the efficiency of the learning process, similarly, there should be a separate unit on Language Learning strategies and their uses in the curriculum of Undergraduate students of Shivaji university. Once the students and teachers are trained to recognize and use the LLS, students will acquire and use language more efficiently.

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