

Language Learning Strategy Use and English Language Proficiency

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Abstract *The present study has tried to probe the relationship between English language proficiency and the use of language learning strategies. The 450 participants, who were MA English final year/semester students, were taken from 6 different universities of the two provinces (Punjab & Khyber Pukhtunkhwa) of Pakistan. The 50 item Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was delivered to all the available and willing students in the class. The data obtained from SILL was analyzed via SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) by calculating the mean values for the three proficiency levels (low, medium and high proficiency). The data analysis revealed that there is a strong relationship between English language proficiency and the use of language learning strategies.*

Key Words:

Strategy,
Proficiency,
Inventory,
Cognitive

Introduction

For the last thirty years there has been increasing focus on the learner himself/herself rather than teaching methods or teaching material. The objective of such an approach is to make the learner autonomous and independent in the process of learning by letting him/her exploit the learning resources himself/herself. For this purpose, the use of language learning strategies (LLS) is considered to be highly useful for learning any language. It equips the learners with the skill to learn a language by himself/herself.

Language learning strategies has been defined variously by different researchers and there is hardly any consensus among them. A few of these definitions given here will reveal the severity of the problem of defining LLSs. Stern (1975) defines LLSs as ‘general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach employed by the language learner’. Bailystok (1978:71) explains that ‘learning strategies are the optional means for exploiting the available information to improve competence in second language’. O’Malley et al. (1985:23) defines LLSs ‘set of operations or steps used by a learner that will

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facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information'; while Weinstein and Mayer (1986:17) define them as 'behaviors and thoughts that learners engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner's encoding process'. Oxford (1990:1) provides a more comprehensive definition that 'learning strategies are steps taken by the learners to enhance their own learning'.

Each one of these definitions (and a lot more indeed) needs comprehensive discussions (which is beyond the scope of the present study) where there can be points of agreement and disagreement. However, all of the researchers unanimously agree that LLSs help the learners enhance and facilitate their learning.

Research Question of the Study

The present study will answer the following research question:

- What effect does M.A English/linguistics students' English language proficiency has on their use of language learning strategies?

Literature Review

Extensive research studies have been carried out about Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and it is difficult to encompass all of them. Therefore, the present study will mention some pioneering studies and a few those focusing on the relationship of proficiency and language learning strategies use.

Rubin and Stern (1975) were the pioneering researchers who studied the 'good language learners' and tried to find out techniques/strategies did they use to cope with language learning. The 'lessons learned' from the good language learner might help the less successful language learners to get success in L2 learning. These earlier studies were more theoretical than the later studies (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco's 1978 study, Rubin's (1981) study, and the work done by O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo (I 985).) which were more empirical.

While investigating the good language learners' behaviors, and using a questionnaire, Politzer and Politzer & McGroarty (1985) find out varied results, where for some learners, proficiency was strongly correlated with the use of language learning strategies while for others it was not. They also pointed out differences in the use of LLS between Hispanic and Asian learners. Consequently, they recommend that care should be taken while describing the good language learner's behavior.

Green and Oxford (1995) they investigated the relationship between proficiency and language learning strategy use among diverse geographical and cultural environments. They reported that learners who had a better proficiency

level made use of a greater number of language learning strategies. However, the study did not address the problem of causality.

McIntyre (1994) also tried to probe the relationship between proficiency and LLSs. The study established that there was a relationship between the two variables, however, he raised questions about the nature of the relationship between them i.e. “this might be interpreted to mean that either proficiency influences the choice of strategies or that strategy choice is simply a sign of proficiency level” (1994, p. 188). Nonetheless, he answers the question that he raised himself that the answer is BOTH” (1994, p. 189). But the answer seems to be his own intuitive judgment by declaring LLSs as both the cause and the outcome.

Green and Oxford (1995) had similar concerns, as raised by McIntyre, while studying the relationship between LLSs and proficiency. They noted that successful language learners use LLSs more frequently than the less successful learners. They concluded that there is a causal relationship between strategy use and proficiency level, and that this relationship works both ways i.e. proficiency being the cause and the effect of LLSs use and LLSs use being both the cause and the effect of proficiency (1995, p.288). Such a conclusion can be the subjective of the researchers but there is no empirical evidence for the justification of such a claim.

The picture here of the relationship between LLSs and proficiency is highly complicated, as it is difficult to decide whether LLSs use the cause or the effect. However, it is well established that there is strong relationship between LLSs and proficiency and the current study focuses on the same phenomenon.

Methodology

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

The major instrument used in the present study is Rebecca Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning version 7. This inventory consists of fifty items based on five point Likert scale. The fifty items are divided into six subgroups

1. Memory Strategies
2. cognitive strategies
3. compensation strategies
4. metacognitive strategies
5. affective strategies
6. Social strategies.

This inventory is basically designed for speakers of other languages who are learning English as a second language.

Sampling

The population (450) of the study were taken from six universities of Pakistan (3 universities from Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and 3 from Punjab) that were accessible for the researcher. All the participants were MA English final year/semester students (both male and female) who had sufficient exposure to English language.

Proficiency Test

In the present study First Certificate in English (FCE) was delivered to the participants to gauge the English language proficiency level of the participants. For the purpose of the present research, the term proficiency was defined according to FCE level B2 of the Council of European Common Framework of Reference for languages. The FCE test is divided into four grades from A to E, and each grade is awarded to the candidates according to the following formula:

Grade A = 80-100 marks

Grade B = 75-79 marks

Grade C = 60-74 marks

Grade D = 55-59 marks

Grade E = 54 marks or below

Data Analysis

In the current study none of the participants of the study scored A grade and very few scored B grade. Most of the participants' scores ranged from grade C to E. Therefore, ignoring the FCE criterion of grades, we adopted a different formula for categorising the scores of the candidates. The test scores of the candidates were divided into three categories: those who scored 50% or below were labelled as "*low proficiency*" students; those who secured from 51% to 65% marks were termed as "*medium proficiency*" students; and those who scored 65% or above marks were termed as "*high proficiency*" students. Statistically significant relationship was found between the proficiency levels and the use of language learning strategies. On the whole, the "high" proficiency students used greater number of language learning strategies than those with "medium" or "low" proficiency. The table given below shows the Mean (X) and Standard Deviation (SD) for all the strategies of SILL and for its five subscales.

Table 1. Mean Score of Language Learning Strategies Use in terms Proficiency Level

Learning Strategies	English Proficiency						Sign. Level	Comments
	High		Medium		Low			
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
Overall Strategies	3.58	0.35	3.27	0.23	3.04	0.49	P<.001	H>M>L
Memory	3.31	0.53	3.01	0.44	2.80	0.60	P<.001	H>M>L
Cognitive	3.62	0.49	3.26	0.37	3.05	0.56	P<.001	H>M>L
Compensation	3.46	0.58	3.25	0.57	2.99	0.64	P<.001	H>M>L
Metacognitive	4.06	0.53	3.72	0.50	3.46	0.75	P<.001	H>M>L
Affective	3.27	0.64	3.00	0.60	2.81	0.64	P<.001	H>M>L
Social	3.56	0.72	3.26	0.63	3.02	0.84	P<.001	H>M>L

The table 1 above shows that on the whole, the students with a high level of proficiency make greater use of language learning strategies with the mean value of (P<.001), showing a strong relationship. The results of the data analysis also show that students with “medium” proficiency make greater use of language learning strategies than those with” low” proficiency and students with” high” proficiency make even greater use of language learning strategies than those having “medium” proficiency (H>M>L). The mean scores for the three levels of proficiency are: High Proficiency (HP) 3.58 (X) >Medium Proficiency (MP) 3.27(X)>Low Proficiency (LP) 3.04(X) along the overall strategies. The results of the data analysis do not give any indication that a particular group of strategies is used more by a specific group of learners but rather there is a kind of uniformly increasing difference in the use of language learning strategies from low proficiency to the high proficiency.

Again, for the subgroups or subscales of SILL a significant relationship was discovered between the mean scores of the students and their English language proficiency (P<.001). For example, the mean scores for “memory strategies” across 450 students are 3.31(X), 3.01(X), and 2.08(X) for high, medium and low proficiency students i.e. H>M>L. Similarly, the results of the data analysis for all the six subscales of SILL show a significant relationship between proficiency and the use of language learning strategies (P<.001 for all the six subscales of SILL).The mean scores of high proficiency students are higher than medium proficiency students and medium proficiency students higher than that of low

proficiency on all the six subscales of SILL. Here, we may also note one important point that the mean score of the high proficiency students is 4.06 (X) for *Metacognitive Strategies* which means that these students put more efforts than the medium or low proficiency students to organise and manage their language learning process. This reveals that proficiency does affect the use of language learning strategies. The *medium proficiency* students make greater use of language learning strategies than those having low proficiency and those with *high proficiency* make even greater use of language learning strategies than those with *medium proficiency*.

Table 2. Mean Score of Language Learning Strategies Use in terms Proficiency for the Subscale of Memory Strategies

Memory Strategies	High		Medium		Low		Sign. Level	Comments
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
think of relationship	3.59	.94	3.38	.976	3.24	.97	P<.01	H>L, M=L
Use new words in sentence	3.70	1.11	3.46	.990	3.28	1.17	P<.01	H>L, M=L
connect the sound and image	3.74	1.10	3.26	1.24	2.96	1.33	P<.001	H>L, M=L
make a mental picture	3.94	.94	3.47	1.19	3.19	1.22	P<.001	H>L, M=L
use rhymes	2.87	1.30	2.43	1.17	2.28	1.23	P<.001	H>M, H>L M=L
use flash cards	2.06	1.17	1.99	1.15	1.74	1.06	P<.05	H>L, M=L
physically act out words	2.94	1.25	2.60	1.16	2.49	1.19	P<.01	H>L, M=L
review lessons	3.64	.96	3.30	1.08	3.02	1.15	P<.001	H>L, H>M M=L
remember location	3.34	1.36	3.21	1.24	3.02	1.39	n.s	n.s

In the table 2 given above, results of the data analysis for the subgroup of *Memory Strategies* have been shown. The subgroup of *Memory Strategies* consists of nine items. The sign levels for 8 items out of 9 are p<.01, .001 and .05. It means that there is a positive co-relation between English language proficiency and the use of *Memory Strategies*. The only item that does not show

a positive relationship between proficiency and the use of *Memory Strategies* is item no.9 (the last item). Here, it can also be observed that the high proficiency students use the highest number of Memory Strategies while medium proficiency students use more Memory strategies than low proficiency students.

Table 3. Mean Score of Language Learning Strategies Use in terms of Proficiency for the Subscale of Cognitive Strategies

Proficiency								
	High		Medium		Low		Sign. Level	Comments
Cognitive Strategies	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
say or write words	3.63	1.17	3.32	1.18	3.14	1.15	P<.001	H>L
try to talk like natives	3.51	1.19	3.09	1.19	2.88	1.30	P<.001	H>L, H>M
practise the sounds	3.80	1.03	3.43	0.90	3.09	1.20	P<.001	H>L
use the words	3.81	0.98	3.39	1.01	3.15	1.17	P<.001	H>L, H>M
start conversation	3.44	1.12	3.11	0.99	2.92	1.09	P<.001	H>L, H>M
watch shows or movies	3.44	1.16	3.10	1.16	3.11	1.29	n.s	All same
Read for pleasure	3.71	1.18	3.38	1.10	3.05	1.26	P<.001	H>L
write notes, msg in eng	4.09	0.93	3.51	1.15	3.29	1.18	P<.001	H>L, H>M
skim read then read	4.04	1.07	3.73	1.09	3.38	1.29	P<.001	H>L
look for similar words	3.49	1.24	3.10	1.22	3.02	1.15	P<.001	H>L, H>M
try to find patterns	3.40	1.10	2.93	1.10	2.75	1.15	P<.001	H>L, H>M
dividing words in parts	3.47	1.16	3.25	1.30	3.10	1.15	P<.05	H>L
do not translate	3.23	1.30	2.96	1.21	2.78	1.24	P<.01	H>L
make summaries	3.67	1.20	3.43	1.08	3.05	1.25	P<.001	H>L, M>L

Table 3 shows the relationship between English language proficiency and the use of language learning strategies. For most of the cognitive strategies, there is a strong relationship between the proficiency level and the use of language learning strategies (H>M, H>L or M>L). High proficiency students use more

LLS than medium proficiency students and medium proficiency students use greater number of LLS than lower proficiency students. Only for the sixth item (item no. 15 of SILL) in this group does not show any significant relationship between English language proficiency and the use of language learning strategies. The mean scores for all the three levels of proficiency are above 3.0 or above, with some exceptions at few places. The mean scores for the medium proficiency students are comparatively higher than those of low proficiency and the mean scores of high proficiency are higher than that of medium proficiency. Item no. 8 (I write notes, messages, letters and reports in English) and 9 (I first skim-read an English passage then go back and read carefully), are the highly used strategies in the cognitive group with the mean values of (4.09, 4.04), (3.51, 3.73) and (3.29, 3.38) for high, medium and low proficiency learners respectively.

Table 4. Mean Score of Language Learning Strategies Use in terms Proficiency for the Subscale of Compensation Strategies

Compensation Strategies	High		Medium		Low		Sign. Level	Comments
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
make guesses	3.79	1.03	3.61	1.04	3.44	1.04	P<.05	H>L
use gestures	3.57	1.11	3.46	1.20	3.01	1.14	P<.001	H>M, H>L
makeup new words	3.15	1.27	2.93	1.18	2.82	1.27	n.s	All same
read without looking	2.89	1.251	2.80	1.18	2.62	1.19	n.s	H>L
try my to guess	3.48	1.067	3.09	1.10	2.82	1.13	P<.001	H>M, H>L
use word means same	3.90	1.096	3.63	1.04	3.24	1.17	P<.001	H>L, M>L

Table 4 shows the relationship between proficiency and *Compensation Strategies*. For *Compensation Strategies*, the results of the data analysis also show a significant relationship with the proficiency of the students. With the exception of item 26 (I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English) and 27 (I read English without looking up every new word) which do not relate to language proficiency, the rest of the four items reveal significant relationship between the two variables. Item 29 and 24 of SILL are the most frequently used strategies in this group for all the three proficiency levels of learners with the highest mean values.

Table 5. Mean Score of Language Learning Strategies Use in terms Proficiency for the Subscale of Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive Strategies	High		Medium		Low		Sign. Level	Comments
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
try to find as many ways as I can	3.86	.93	3.44	.94	3.18	1.10	P<.001	H>L, H>M
notice my mistakes and use this information	4.53	.66	3.99	.95	3.85	1.07	P<.001	H>L, H>M
pay attention when someone is speaking	4.58	.67	4.27	.92	4.01	1.01	P<.001	All diff
try to find out how to be a better learner	4.39	.77	4.22	.84	3.87	1.03	P<.001	H>M M>L
plan my schedule so that will have enough	3.47	1.09	3.21	1.12	2.84	1.22	P<.001	H>M M>L
look for people I can talk	3.75	1.08	3.35	1.07	3.04	1.22	P<.001	H>L, H>M
look for opportunities to read	3.78	.99	3.59	.99	3.26	1.179	P<.001	H>M M>L
have clear goals for improving	3.83	1.00	3.50	1.09	3.38	1.151	P<.01	H>L, H>M
think about my progress in learning	4.36	.75	3.98	.89	3.69	1.021	P<.001	All diff

Table 5 shows the relation between proficiency and *Metacognitive Strategies*. *Metacognitive Strategies* are concerned with the self-organization and self-

control of one's learning process. In most of the previous studies they have been observed to be the highly used group of strategies (i.e. Griffiths, 2005; Oxford, 1990). The present study is a confirmation of those studies as our results are not very different from them. In the present study, six out of the thirteen highly used strategies are from the *Metacognitive* group of strategies. All the nine strategies of the group are used highly frequently by learners of the high and medium proficiency levels i.e. the mean values for the two proficiency levels are above the standard mean (3.50 or above) of highly used strategies with the exceptions of item no. 30, 34 and 35 for medium proficiency learners. The low proficiency learners make a comparatively lesser use of metacognitive strategies than the medium or high proficiency learners but their use of metacognitive strategies is much greater when compared with other six subgroups of SILL. The students of the three proficiency levels reveal significant variation in the use of metacognitive strategies. The high proficiency students make a greater use of metacognitive strategies than medium proficiency students, and the medium proficiency students than that of low proficiency students i.e. $H > M > L$. Item no. 32 and 38 of SILL do not show any significant differences for the learners of the three proficiency levels but the rest of the nine items are used at various frequencies by the students all the three proficiency levels. Item no. 32 (I pay attention when someone is speaking English) is the most highly used strategy by all the three proficiency level students having the mean values of 4.58, 4.27 and 4.01 for high, medium and low proficiency students respectively.

Table 6. Mean Score of Language Learning Strategies Use in terms Proficiency for the Subscale of Affective Strategies

Affective Strategies	High		Moderate		Low		Sign. Level	Comments
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
try to relax whenever feel afraid of using	3.54	1.20	3.37	1.22	2.99	1.16	$P < .001$	$H > M$ $M > L$
encourage myself to speak	4.05	1.12	3.49	1.12	3.51	1.13	$P < .001$	$H > L$, $H > M$
give myself a reward or treat	3.36	1.34	3.09	1.32	3.04	1.30	n.s	n.s
notice if I am tense	3.24	1.40	3.14	1.24	3.05	1.21	n.s	n.s

or nervous when I studying								
write down my feelings in a language learning diary	2.37	1.35	2.04	1.161	1.69	1.02	P<.001	H>M M>L
talk to someone about how I feel when I am learning	3.07	1.27	2.87	1.132	2.60	1.20	P<.01	H>L

Table 6 shows the relation between proficiency and *Affective Strategies*. Affective Strategies are used by the learners to control their states of being worried or anxious in the process of second/foreign language learning. In the table given above, we can observe that even this group of strategies is used more frequently by the high proficiency students than the medium or low proficiency students. With the exception of strategy no. 43 (I write down my feelings in a language learning diary), which is used less frequently by learners of all the three proficiency levels, the rest of the five strategies are used at high or medium frequency by the high proficiency students. It implies that the use of diary writing for English language learning is a less common practice in Pakistan. Significant variation in the use of affective strategies among the high, medium and low proficiency students can also be seen for strategy no.39 (I try to relax whenever feel afraid of using English), 40 (I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake), 43 (I write down my feelings in a language learning diary) and 44 (I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English) in the above table. Only strategy 41 (I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English) and 42 (I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English) do not reveal any significant relationship with respect to variation in learners’ proficiency.

Table 7. Mean Score of Language Learning Strategies Use in terms Proficiency for the Subscale of Social Strategies

Social Strategies	High		Medium		Low		Sign. Level	Comments
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
ask to slow down.	3.72	1.11	3.41	1.22	3.44	1.17	N.S	All same
ask to correct me	3.36	1.27	3.22	1.24	2.82	1.37	P<.01	H>M M>L
practise English	3.75	1.03	3.38	1.00	3.22	1.23	P<.001	H>M H>L
ask for help	3.37	1.15	3.19	1.14	2.72	1.42	P<.001	H>M M>L
ask questions	3.85	1.06	3.42	1.06	3.16	1.09	P<.001	H>M ,H>L
learn about the culture of Eng	3.33	1.30	2.96	1.30	2.74	1.31	P<.001	H>L

The table 7 above shows the relationship between proficiency and *Social Strategies* of SILL. *Social Strategies* are mainly used in interaction with people. The analysis of the data in the table given above reveals a significant relationship between the proficiency in English language and the use of *Social Strategies*. Only item no. 45 (If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again) does not show any significant relation with proficiency, the rest of the five strategies does show a significant relationship between English language proficiency and the use of language learning strategies. The variation in the relationship is directed from H>M>L i.e. the high proficiency learners make greater use of language learning strategies than medium proficiency and medium proficiency greater than that of low proficiency students.

Summary of the Findings

The present had asked the question: *What effect does M.A English/linguistics students' English language proficiency has on their use of language learning strategies?* After the analysis of the data, it was found that proficiency and LLSs use was strongly correlated. The results of the data analysis also showed that students with "medium" proficiency make greater use of language learning

strategies than those with "low" proficiency and students with "high" proficiency make even greater use of language learning strategies than those having "medium" proficiency (H>M>L). Proficiency is not only strongly correlated with the overall strategies of SILL but also for subscales of SILL where the same pattern of language learning strategies use continues i.e. medium proficiency students using more strategies than low proficiency students and high proficiency students using more language learning strategies than the medium proficiency students (H>M>L).

Recommendations and Implications of the Study

The current study was carried out on 450 final year/semester students studying MA English literature /linguistics. It was discovered that the students use a sufficient number of strategies from the overall 50 strategies of SILL. It was also found that more proficient students use greater number of strategies than less proficient students. Therefore, the educational institutions which use Urdu or any other tongue as a medium of instruction should direct their efforts to make maximum number of lessons in English from the very beginning of the children's education so that when reaching at higher level of education the students may become proficient enough to use English for practical purposes.

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