

A Study on English Language Majoring Students' Use of English Language Learning Strategies: Hawassa University Students in Focus

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ABSTRACT

This research was meant to examine whether English language majoring students are high, medium or low users of each of the six groups of the English language learning strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social. Hence, the design of this study is a descriptive survey. To this end, 61 English language majoring students enrolled from 2012/13 to 2014/15 at Hawassa University were made to take part in the study. Convenient sampling technique was used. That is, only those students who were present in the classroom during the administration of the questionnaire took part. Data were collected by Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* questionnaire-Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL). Results of the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively by applying the procedures suggested by Oxford, and thus the study employed a quantitative approach. The findings revealed that the students are medium users of the learning strategies, but high users of the metacognitive and social learning strategies. High users are those who always or almost always use and those who usually use; medium users are those who sometimes use. Lastly, recommendations have been made accordingly.

Key terms

English language, learning strategies, high, medium, low users

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

English language is a popular lingua franca. A lingua franca can be defined as "a language used as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different" (Soanes and Stevenson, 2006, p. 828). The people of the European Union member countries, for instance, use

English besides their own languages. Globally, international and continental summits are held mainly in English. Moreover, English has become the predominant language of the print and electronic media across the globe. It has also taken the leading position as a language of science and technology that many of the academic papers are published in English. “It pervades and often dominates areas of global life ranging from technology, science and education to commerce, advertising and pop” (Pope, 2002, p. 19). The above scholars conclude that English continues to have a large number of speakers in the world. They justify that in many corners of the globe children raise up multilingual and thus English has become one of these languages. They add that as far as globalization is concerned English will continue as one of the main languages of the world.

The introduction of the English language into Ethiopia dates back to the introduction of modern education into the country (Dejenie, 1990). When the western education got into Ethiopia in the early nineteenth century, English was taught as a subject whereas French served as a medium of instruction. According to Tesfaye and Taylor (1976), cited in Geremew (1999), after the Italian invading force was driven out of Ethiopia with the help of the British army in 1941, the British influence in Ethiopia began to grow and as the result of that a shift was made from French domination to English domination.

The English language has played important roles in Ethiopia. For example, as far as international relations of the country are concerned, Ethiopia communicates with foreigners or nations mainly in English. English serves as the official language of the country next to Amharic. It serves as an official language for the international institutions of the country. Specifically, it is often the language of the international aid organizations, Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and African Union (AU). English also serves as the working language for some national institutions such as the Ethiopian Air Lines, banks, and Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation.

Businesspersons often use English to order commodities and other items from abroad. Moreover, these days, many hotels and supermarkets in our country, as a proof of payment, print bill receipts to customers in English. Furthermore, many public advertisements or announcements and road signposts and others, especially in towns and cities of the country, are written in English.

The English language has played different roles at different regimes in the case of Ethiopian education. Geremew (1999), quotes Tesfaye and Taylor (1976), says that, after the Ethio-Italy war, English became the medium of instruction for the majority of subjects from Grade 3 onwards. That role, however, was taken by Amharic for Grades 3-6 as of 1963/4 to the downfall of the military government in 1991. The education policy of the present government has also stated that medium of instruction for Grades 1-6 should be mother tongue and thus this has also decreased the role of English. The use of English as a subject as well as a medium of instruction is not uniform across the country. In some regional states, it is taught as a subject at all levels starting from Grade 1, whereas in other regional states it starts from Grade 3. Again, in some regions it serves as a medium of instruction from Grade 3, whereas in others it starts from Grade 5 and Grade 8. Moreover, the English language has served as a medium of instruction in secondary schools, whereas Amharic and/or some regional or vernacular languages are offered as subjects.

The English language has got an important place especially in higher learning institutions of the country. It can be concluded that ninety-nine percent of the instructional materials and other reference resources of our higher education institutions appear in English. English is serving as a medium of instruction in our universities although some regional or vernacular languages are currently becoming medium of instruction for students who study these languages. It has also continued to be a must to students of all departments, normally in their undergraduate first year studies, to take English courses such as *College English-I*, *College English-II*, *Sophomore English*, *Communicative English Skills-I*, *Communicative English Skills-II*, *Basic Writing Skills*, *Advanced Writing-I*, *Advanced Writing-II*, and/or *(Technical) Report Writing*. Moreover, almost in all the universities in the country, there is a Department of English that trains students for a bachelor's/master's degree.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The literature widely discusses that students' use of the English language learning strategies improves their English language learning/proficiency. *Learning strategy* has been defined in various ways. Oxford (1990, p. 8) defines *learning strategy* as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and

more transferable to new situations.” Her definition is usually taken as a model definition because she is an authority and the definition also includes what are missed in the definitions of many scholars.

Classifications of learning strategies carried out at different times were based on different issues. The early taxonomy was based on the strategies good and poor language learners use. Current classification has been based on the direct/indirect contributions strategies make for learning or on the level and type of information processed by learners when they use them. Oxford (1990) classifies learning strategies into two broad categories. Her classification is based on the role of the strategies for learning. Strategies that give direct contribution to students’ learning are named as *direct* strategies and strategies that play indirect role are called *indirect* strategies. *Direct* learning strategies include *memory*, *cognitive*, and *compensation* strategies and *indirect* learning strategies include *metacognitive*, *affective* and *social* strategies (Refer the table appended and shows the specific English language learning strategies that a student does as far as each of the six groups of the language learning strategies is concerned.). Oxford’s (1990) classification of learning strategies is comprehensive, and thus has been used as the theoretical framework by many researchers such as Rahimi et al., 2008; Deneme, 2008; Vidal, 2002; Sasaki, 2000; Ellis, 1994 (cited in Alptekin, 2007).

Students, especially at higher learning levels, need to be at least medium users of the English language learning strategies. The English language scholars abroad have conducted researches on their students’ use of the English language learning strategies and have recommended that appropriate actions would be taken accordingly in order to help the students improve their use of the learning strategies; as a result, their English language learning/proficiency would be improved (Deneme, 2008; Man-fat, 2008; Dhanapala, 2007; Martinez, 1995). However, nobody has studied this matter so far in Ethiopian context in order to examine whether students especially at university level are high, medium or low users of the English language learning strategies. The literature states that students’ use of the target language learning strategies can be affected by specific cultural and educational contexts of a nation and by the students’ target language ability, age, gender, learning styles, and motivation and attitudes towards the target language.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This research was intended to examine English language majoring students' use of the English language learning strategies, with reference Hawassa University students. Specifically, the study was meant to examine whether the English language majoring students are high, medium or low users of each of the six groups of the English language learning strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

2.1 Research Design and Approach

This study was intended to examine whether the English language majoring students are high, medium or low users of each of the six groups of the English language learning strategies. To this end, Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* questionnaire-Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) was administered to the English language majoring students enrolled from 2012/13 to 2014/15 at Hawassa University, and quantitative data were collected. The data obtained were analyzed quantitatively. Thus, the design of this research is a descriptive survey and the research employed a quantitative approach.

2.2 Description of Study Setting and Participants

The researcher purposefully chose Hawassa University to which he is a member of staff, for he felt that conducting the study here would minimize the social, financial and time constraints that might hamper the results of the study. Hawassa University is a public university found in the South Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State of Ethiopia. It is a comprehensive university engaged in the provision of all-round education, research, training and community services.

School of Languages and Communication Studies is one of the schools under the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Hawassa University. The school was established in 2001 as the Department of Foreign Language and Literature under the Faculty of Social Sciences. Before its establishment as a department, it was serving as an English Unit under the Faculty of Basic Sciences and was offering common courses such as College English-I, College English-II, and Sophomore English. The name of the department has been changed into the School of Languages

and Communication Studies since 2012 after launching MA program in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and BA program in Journalism and Communication. More recently, the school has opened BA programs in Sidama Language and Literature and in Chinese Language and MA programs in Journalism and Mass Communication and in Linguistics and Multicultural Studies.

Sixty-one English language majoring students enrolled from 2012/13 to 2014/15 at Hawassa University took part in the study. The number of males is 45, whereas the number of females is 16. The participants were between 18-24 years old; the majority of them were between 19-21 years old. Convenient sampling technique was used to include the participants. That is, only those students who were present in the classroom during the administration of the questionnaire took part in the study.

2.3 Adopting Questionnaire

Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* questionnaire-Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) was adopted; Oxford is the authority of this questionnaire. It included items where each item had five possible responses: always, usually, sometimes, rarely and never. The questionnaire was intended to gather data on the students' use of the English language learning strategies. The *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* questionnaire is the most widely used tool for identifying students' language learning strategies and how often they tend to use the strategies (Oxford, 1990; Griffiths, 2003; Chamot, 2005; Alireza and Abdullah, 2010). The questionnaire has two versions. One is for *English Speakers Learning a New Language* and coded as 5.1. The other version, which was chosen for this study, is for *Speakers of Other Languages Learning English* and is coded as 7.0 (ESL/EFL). "SILL Version 7.0, containing 50 items, is geared to students of English as a second or foreign language.... The language is very simplified....The SILL's 5-point scale (for all versions) ranges from "never or almost never" to "always or almost always" (Oxford, 1990, p. 199).

2.4 Administering Questionnaire

A total of 61 participants (45 males and 16 females) were made to fill in the questionnaire meant to collect data on the students' use of the English language learning strategies. Before the participants began to fill in the questionnaire, they had received a brief explanation about the aim

of the study. Moreover, careful attempts were made to make the environment conducive to fill in the questionnaire.

2.5 Methods of Data Analysis

Results of the questionnaire were analyzed by applying the procedures suggested by Oxford (1990, pp. 298-300). To be specific, firstly, the items of the questionnaire were categorized into the six groups of the English language learning strategies.

Secondly, values 1 to 5 were given for 'Never or almost never true of me', 'usually not true of me', 'somewhat true of me', 'usually true of me', and 'always or almost always true of me' respectively so that the minimum score a participant would score is the number of the items of a group multiplied by 1, and the maximum score a participant would score is the number of the items of a group multiplied by 5.

Thirdly, each participant's total scores on each of the six groups of the English language learning strategies were divided by the number of its items. Accordingly, a participant's minimum score becomes 1.0 and maximum score becomes 5.0 for each of the six groups of the English language learning strategies.

Fourthly, participants who scored from 3.5 to 5.0, 2.5 to 3.4 and 1.0 to 2.4 were counted separately and changed into percentage and the figures along with their respective percentages were made to appear in a table.

Lastly, these were described and, based on the responses of the majority of the participants, implications or generalizations were drawn for each of the six groups of the English language learning strategies. In doing so, the participants who scored from 3.5 to 5.0, 2.5 to 3.4 and 1.0 to 2.4 were stated as high, medium and low users respectively. High users are those who always or almost always use and those who usually use; medium users are those who sometimes use; low users are those who generally not use and those who never or almost never use (Oxford, 1990, p. 300).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table shows the results of the questionnaire.

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
High	9 (14.75%)	15 (24.59%)	15 (24.59%)	37 (60.65%)	25 (40.98%)	29 (47.54%)
Medium	40 (65.57%)	37 (60.65%)	35 (57.37%)	16 (26.22%)	29 (47.54%)	26 (42.62%)
Low	12 (19.67%)	9 (14.75%)	11 (18.03%)	8 (13.11%)	7 (11.47%)	6 (9.83%)

The above table shows the results of the questionnaire administered in order to obtain data on the students' use of each of the six groups of the English language learning strategies. Accordingly, with regard to the memory learning strategies, the table reveals that the number of high users is 9 (14.75%); the number of medium users is 40 (65.57%); the number of low users is 12 (19.67%). Thus, as the responses of the large majority of the participants (65.57%) confirm, the students are medium users of the memory learning strategies. The results correspond with the findings of Deneme (2008) who found the same about the Turkish university learners in their study of English.

When it comes to the cognitive learning strategies, the above table shows that the number of high users is 15 (24.59%), whereas the number of medium users is 37 (60.65%) and low users is 9 (14.75%). The responses of the vast majority of the participants (60.65%) imply that the students are medium users of the cognitive learning strategies. The results are consistent with the findings of Deneme (2008) and Martinez (1995) who found the same about the Turkish and Spanish university learners in their study of English respectively.

The above table also depicts that 15 (24.59%) of the participants are high users; the number of medium users is 35, which takes 57.37% of the participants, whereas the remaining 11 (18.03%) of the respondents are low users of the compensation learning strategies. The majority of the participants (57.37%) are found to be medium users, and thus this implies that the students are medium users of the compensation learning strategies.

Moreover, the above table demonstrates that 37 (60.65%) of the respondents are high users, whereas 16 (26.22%) of the respondents are medium users and the remaining 8 (13.11%) of them are low users of the metacognitive learning strategies. Thus, as the responses of the majority of the participants (60.65%) reveal, it is generalized that the students are high users of the learning strategies. The results match with the findings of Deneme (2008) who found that the Turkish university learners in their study of English reported high use of the metacognitive strategies.

Furthermore, it is depicted that the high, medium and low users of the affective learning strategies becomes 25 (40.98%), 29 (47.54%) and 7 (11.47%) respectively. As the responses of the majority of the respondents (47.54%) testify, it is generalized that the students are medium users of the learning strategies. The results are compatible with the findings of Deneme (2008) and Man-fat (2008) who found that the Turkish and Chinese ESL Learners of Hong Kong, respectively, in their study of English at university reported medium use of the affective strategies.

Lastly, the above table also shows the results obtained in order to examine whether the students are high, medium or low users of the social learning strategies. Accordingly, 29 (47.54%) and 26 (42.62%) of the respondents are identified as high and medium users respectively, whereas the remaining 6 (9.83%) of the respondents are low users. As the responses of the majority of the participants (47.54%) imply, the students are high users of the social learning strategies. The results are consistent with the findings of Man-fat (2008) who found that the Chinese ESL Learners of Hong Kong in their study of English at university reported that the social strategies were found to be more popular among them.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the English language majoring students at Hawassa University are medium users of the memory, cognitive, compensation, and affective learning strategies. However, they are found to be high users of the metacognitive and social learning strategies. This can be generalized to the English language majoring students of other universities across the nation. According to the existing placement policy, the student population does not vary from

one university to another in terms of demography, English language ability, gender, age, learning styles, affective factors, and family, educational, academic, and social background.

The following recommendations have been made based on the conclusions of the study.

- English language instructors need to play their own role in order to improve students' use of especially the memory, cognitive, compensation, and affective learning strategies. As a result, the students would be high users of each of these learning strategies so that they could improve their English language learning/proficiency accordingly.
- Studies should be conducted on the students' use of the English language learning strategies in terms of different proficiency levels, gender, age, family or educational background, learning styles and affective factors.

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APPENDIX

The following table shows the specific English language learning strategies that a student does as far as each of the six groups of the language learning strategies is concerned (Oxford, 1990, pp. 294-296).

Memory
I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me

remember the word.
I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
I use rhymes to remember new English words.
I use flashcards to remember new English words.
I physically act out new English words.
I review English lessons often.
I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board or on a street sign.
Cognitive
I say or write new English words several times.
I try to talk like native English speakers.
I practice the sounds of English.
I use the English words I know in different ways.
I start conversations in English.
I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.
I read for pleasure in English.
I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.
I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.
I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.
I try to find patterns in English.
I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.
I try not to translate word-for-word.
I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.
Compensation
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.
When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.
I read English without looking up every new word.
I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.

If cannot think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.
Metacognitive
I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.
I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.
I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.
I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
I look for people I can talk to in English.
I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
I have clear goals for improving my English skills.
I think about my progress in learning English.
Affective
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.
I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.
Social
If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.
I practice English with other students.
I ask for help from English speakers.
I ask questions in English.
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.