

Language Learning Strategies Used by Indian University Students from Rural Backgrounds

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KEYWORDS English Language Learning. Metacognition. Memory. Strategies

ABSTRACT The use of language learning strategies (LLS) has been found to enhance learner autonomy and lead to positive academic outcomes. This study investigates the pattern of language learning strategies used by rural learners of English as a second language in India. The frequency of strategy use by 434 learners was recorded using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire. The data analysed showed that learners preferred to use metacognitive strategies more frequently and memory strategies less regularly. The results also indicated a significant positive correlation between memory-compensation, cognitive-compensation, metacognitive-social, and affective-social strategies. The paper concludes with an emphasis on the need to understand the importance of LLS, thereby inculcating it in regular classroom practices to help learners become proficient in English language skills.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant shift in language pedagogy, from being teacher-centred to being more learner-centred (Lessard-Clouston 1997), with a considerable number of studies investigating the role of language learning strategies (LLS) in learning English as a second language (Habók and Magyar 2020; Alhaysony 2017; Charoento 2017; Dawadi 2017; Oxford 2017, 2011; Cohen 2016; Liyanage 2004). LLS, as Oxford (1990) states, “are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning faster, more enjoyable, more effective and more transferable to new situations (8).” Chamot (2005) described it as “special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information (1).” Therefore, LLS were viewed as specific ways of improving one’s comprehension, learning, and retention of information leading to enhancement in learners’ language proficiency (Green and Oxford 1995; Oxford and Burry-Stock 1995). Many other important variables like learning style, personality, culture and socio-economic background influence the choice of LLS of L1 or L2 learners (Liu 2015; Tam 2013; Lee 2003). Therefore, language teachers must be aware of their learners’ LLS and individual differences that would fully cater to the needs of the individuals and help them perform better. The present study tried to understand the pattern of language learning strategies used by rural learners of English as a second language in India.

Objectives of the Study

The study tried to obtain the following objectives:

1. To investigate overall patterns of strategies used by learners from rural backgrounds when learning English as a second language.
2. To explore the relationship between different strategy sub-groups in the study.

English Language Education in Tamil Nadu, India

Tamil Nadu is one of the most developed states in India, consisting of 32 districts. Though getting urbanised quickly, most of its population, that is, 56 percent, lives in rural areas (Census of India 2011). As far as English language teaching in Tamil Nadu’s school system is concerned, most schools (61%) are directly run by the government, and most of these schools are Tamil-medium (Williams 2010). Overcrowded classrooms and less exposure to English make it difficult for students in these schools to gain competence in the language.

Rationale for the Study

The present study focuses on identifying the LLS employed by a group of rural students who belong to the Support The Advancement of Rural Students (STARS) unit at a privately-funded university in Vellore in Tamil Nadu, India. As a part of

the STARS programme, the university provides educational opportunities to underprivileged students from the socially backward rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India. Most of these students studied in government schools in rural areas, where the primary mode of instruction was their mother tongue, Tamil. As a result, their exposure to English had been limited, and they found it challenging to communicate in the language. Though they were top-ranking students in their school board exams from their respective districts, they needed help to overcome language barriers and achieve proficiency in English language skills for success in higher education and professional life. For this, many steps were taken by the stakeholders, like arranging special classes for them, providing appropriate learning material, and providing them opportunities to meet and communicate with students who were proficient speakers of English. To design a suitable teaching methodology to instruct them, this study was conducted to gauge their awareness of and use of learning strategies.

Review of Language Learning Strategy Research

Since the early 80s, various researchers have devised different ways of studying LLS. Out of the several classifications laid out by the eminent researchers, Rubin's (1975), O'Malley and Chamot's (1990), and Rebecca L. Oxford's (1990) classifications are the most well-known ones. While Rubin (1975) classified the strategies according to their role in whether they are directly or indirectly involved in the learning process, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified them based on their cognitive functions. Oxford in 1990 focused on the learners' communicative competence and laid out a comprehensive taxonomy system in her Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). This tool has been profusely used, since its conception, across many studies. Oxford categorised the strategies into direct and indirect, with direct strategies subdivided into memory, cognitive, and compensation, and indirect strategies subdivided into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

LLS in Different ESL/EFL Contexts

Much research has been carried out in LLS on various factors affecting strategy use, like gender, motivation, major of study, setting and learning

context of the research (Lancho Perea 2021; Hayati 2015; Zhou and Intaraprasert 2015; Idham 2014; Rusnadi 2014; Grenfell and Macaro 2007; Griffiths 2003). Language proficiency has been strongly associated with strategy use, that is, learners with high proficiency levels were observed to use more direct and indirect strategies (Kato 2005; Green and Oxford 1995). Recent studies have also proved this. For instance, Liu (2015) examined the relationship between language proficiency, learner autonomy, and LLS use by 150 Chinese learners and found a significant correlation between language proficiency and LLS. Thus, it was found that the higher the learners' language proficiency, the more frequently they used learning strategies.

Al-Buainian (2010) administered SILL to 120 Arab learners and reported that they were high to medium-strategy users. Among the strategy categories, metacognitive strategies were more popular, and affective strategies were the least used ones. Similar studies were conducted by Abbasian et al. (2012), Alhaisoni (2012), Faruk İpek and Yesilbursa (2017), and Alrashidi (2022) on 376 Iranian EFL learners, 701 Saudi EFL learners, Turkish and Saudi EFL learners, respectively. The common finding was that most learners used metacognitive strategies most frequently (Habók et al. 2021). Tam (2013), in his study with 50 first-year university learners in Hong Kong, reported that the participants were medium strategy users, with compensation strategies used most frequently and memory and affective used less regularly. Studies by Chuin and Kaur (2015) and Nahavandi (2014) also report congruent results in the overall strategy use of Iranian EFL and Malaysian learners, respectively. In the Indian context, Patil and Karekatti (2012) studied the overall strategy use of 65 engineering students in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra state. Though the learners were found to be high-level strategy users, they were unaware of the benefits of LLS and had problems like anxiety, inhibition, and lack of confidence. A recent study investigation by Wang et al. (2021) showed that native Cantonese speakers mostly used cognitive strategies when learning English as a foreign language, while memory strategies were the least used.

The literature survey shows that most of the studies were conducted in EFL contexts, where learners learn English as a foreign language, and the language is not used for communication in their community. Thus, there is a need to conduct stud-

ies in under-researched Indian contexts of ESL to gain comprehensive information on the patterns of use of LLS.

Research Questions

The study tried to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the overall patterns of strategies used by learners from the rural background when learning English as a second language?
2. What is the relationship between different strategy sub-groups?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study subjects were from the 'Support The Advancement of Rural Students' (STARS) scheme at VIT University in Vellore, India. These students were first-year undergraduates from diverse branches of their engineering program. Their age ranged from 17 to 19 years, and their mother tongue was Tamil. Many students dropped out of school due to financial reasons and then resumed after a year or two. This contributes to the differences in age among the students. All 434 STARS students were involved in the quantitative study.

Data Collection Instrument

The data were collected using a Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire (version 7.0 for ESL/EFL learners) developed by Rebecca L. Oxford (1990). Compared to other questionnaires of the same type (for example, Bialystok 1981; Politzer 1983, etc.), this inventory has been used profusely in several major studies and dissertations (Green and Oxford 1995; Oxford and Burry-Stock 1995). It has also been translated into several languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Korean, Spanish, German, and Ukrainian. The SILL is a self-report questionnaire used to measure the frequency of use of learning strategies among the respondents. The SILL version 7.0, used for ESL/EFL learners, consists of fifty questions divided into six parts based on Oxford's (1990) classification of strategies and is included in her landmark book, *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know* (1990).

The questions of the SILL included memory (9 items), cognitive (14 items), compensation (6 items), metacognitive (9 items), affective (6 items), and social strategies (6 items). All the respondents were asked to rate their responses on a five-point Likert scale for each strategy as never, rarely, sometimes, very often, and always. The index of reliability calculated in the present study was $\alpha=0.83$.

Apart from SILL, five questions related to demographic information, namely, age, gender, year of study, branch, and years of learning English, were included.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

The SILL questionnaire was distributed to 434 STARS students in a regular classroom. Before administering the questionnaire, the researchers gave the students a brief description of the study. Moreover, the students were assured of the confidentiality of the study and its use only for research. It was also made sure that the participation of the students was voluntary. As the researchers were present during the survey, any student queries were clarified. The collected data were then analysed using the software STATA 13.0. Descriptive statistics were implemented to investigate the demographic data, including frequencies, means, standard deviations, and charts. In addition, the six groups of strategies were correlated to find if there were any significant relationships between them.

RESULTS

Answer to Research Question 1

The data gathered through SILL were analysed using STATA 13.0 regarding learners' frequency of use of strategies and their overall use. Table 1 shows that the mean of overall strategy use was 3.42, with a standard deviation of 1.08, indicating the medium use of strategies.

As it is evident from Table 1, social (mean=3.79) and metacognitive strategies (mean=3.70) were the most frequently used strategies, while memory (mean=3.15) and compensation (mean=3.21) were the least used ones among the STARS students. This indicates that the learners preferred study planning techniques, reading improvement prac-

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for language learning strategy use

Strategy	Mean	S.D.	Rank
Social	3.79	1.11	1
Metacognitive	3.70	1.02	2
Affective	3.45	1.09	3
Cognitive	3.23	1.10	4
Compensation	3.21	1.05	5
Memory	3.15	1.13	6
Overall strategy use	3.42	1.08	

Source: Jancy Nandhini Feleciya A. and Shahila Zafar

tices, and learner self-evaluation tools for using new English words, connecting the sound of a new word and a picture, and using gestures and synonyms, and so forth, instead of rote memorising content.

Answer to Research Question 2

In addition to the finding of an overall pattern of strategy use, Pearson's correlation was computed

to find out the relationship between the strategy groups. Table 2 and Table 3 illustrate the correlation between direct and indirect strategies separately.

The results show that among the direct strategies, there is a significant positive linear correlation between memory and compensation ($r = .33$, $N = 43$, $p < .05$). Similarly, a significant moderate positive correlation is found between cognitive and compensation strategies ($r = .40$, $N = 43$, $p < 0.01$). This reveals that as learners learn to understand, store and retrieve new information, they are able to use the language despite their lack of knowledge in certain situations, by using gestures, guessing from contexts, and using synonyms. Also, as learners try to talk to native English speakers, use English words in different ways, and watch movies and TV shows in English, they are able to use gestures when they cannot think of a word, make up new words if they do not know the right ones and guess meanings from contexts.

Likewise, in the indirect strategies category, there was a significant positive relationship found

Table 2: Pearson's correlation coefficient for direct strategies

Factors	Correlation	Direct strategies		
		Memory strategies	Cognitive strategies	Compensation strategies
Memory Strategies	Pearson correlation	-	.251	.334*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	.105	.029
Cognitive Strategies	Pearson correlation	.251	-	.403**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.105	-	.007
Compensation Strategies	Pearson correlation	.334*	.403**	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.029	.007	-

N=434

*Significant correlation at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Significant correlation at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 3: Pearson's correlation for indirect strategies

Factors	Correlation	Indirect strategies		
		Metacognitive strategies	Affective strategies	Social strategies
Metacognitive Strategies	Pearson correlation	-	.531	.486**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	.000	.001
Affective Strategies	Pearson correlation	.531	-	.533**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	-	.000
Social Strategies	Pearson correlation	.486**	.533**	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	-

N=434

**Significant correlation at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Jancy Nandhini Feleciya A. and Shahila Zafar

between metacognitive and social strategies ($r = .48$, $N = 43$, $p < .01$), and a significant strong positive relationship between affective and social strategies ($r = .53$, $N = 43$, $p < .01$). The result shows that when learners evaluate their mistakes, they find as many ways as they can to use English, and plan their schedules. They are able to practise English with other learners, ask questions in English and ask English speakers to correct their mistakes. Similarly, they are motivated to speak in English when they can control their emotions. Likewise, they may not interact and learn with others when they are afraid of making mistakes.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study show that the participants are medium-level users of LLS (mean = 3.42; SD = 1.08). They seem to use metacognitive strategies more frequently when compared to other strategies, while memory and cognitive are used less frequently. This finding is similar to the results obtained in different ESL/EFL contexts, including Habók and Magyar (2020, 2018), Tam (2013), and Wu (2008) in Hong Kongers and Nahavandi (2014) in Iranians, which found the learners using strategies at a medium level. The results are surprising, especially in the context of the prevalent image of the Indian education system being memory-based and promoting rote learning. Irrespective of what teaching and assessment strategies they are exposed to, the learners seem to rely relatively less on memory and more on planning responses and gaining information through interaction.

On computing Pearson's correlation with the direct strategies, it was found that there was a significant positive correlation between memory and compensation strategies and cognitive and compensation strategies. Similarly, among the indirect strategies, a positive linear correlation was found between metacognitive and social strategies and affective and social strategies. These findings have some pedagogical implications for teachers to aid ESL learners in improving their language learning.

Strategy use reported by these learners points out a high preference for metacognitive strategies, which helped them organise, evaluate, and co-ordinate their learning process. Thus, their teachers can concentrate on both content and process and, thereby, facilitate the learning process. Anderson (2002) believes that "Developing metacogni-

tive awareness may also lead to the development of stronger cognitive skills (p.1)." When correlating the direct strategies, it can be seen that memory, cognitive and compensation strategies have a significant positive relationship with each other, that is, when the learners know how to store, retrieve, understand and produce information, they will be able to use the language despite knowledge gaps. This calls for training learners in these strategies to help them cope with uncertain situations or unfamiliar contexts. Correlating indirect strategies led to the finding that metacognitive, affective and social strategies have a significant positive relationship with each other, that is, when the learners learn to organise, evaluate, and control their emotions in the learning process, they will be encouraged to interact with others in the social context. Thus, teachers can focus on helping learners to overcome fear and anxiety while using English in an ESL setting.

English holds an important place in Indian society and is taught and learned as a second language. As there is a large number of rural Indian students for whom speaking fluent English has always been a difficult task (Kool and Aparna 2022; Patil and Karekatti 2012). They often spend a disproportionate amount of time struggling with the language. The chief implication of this study highlights the importance of teachers granting opportunities to their students to use LLS more frequently as their overall strategy use falls under the medium level. The strategies found to be least used in this study, namely, cognitive, compensation, and memory, can also be given more focus. The use of these strategies can be gradually increased through relevant activities in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

As students from rural backgrounds move to bigger towns and cities for higher education, they face an enormous and often debilitating challenge of learning to work with English. This casts a significant drawback when facing the competitive world in securing well-paying jobs in the English-heavy corporate world. Hence, it becomes crucial for these learners to enhance their second language skills. The use of LLS can be considered one of the ways to promote effective English language learning. The present study provided a reasonably clear picture of patterns of language learn-

ing strategies used by learners of English as a second language. Though a moderate strategy usage by students from rural backgrounds, as shown in the results, is concerning, it is not alarming as learners seem to make significant efforts at language planning activities and attempts at interacting in the language. Additionally, the study highlights the need for designing more engaging teaching methods that encourage students to actively implement all language learning strategies for better English proficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Instructors should take more responsibility in catering to the needs of the learners considering their individual differences. Strategy training can be taken into consideration, where instructors incorporate specific strategies for specific skills and encourage learners to use them as often as possible.

LIMITATIONS

Further research on LLS in other ESL contexts, including under-researched South Asian countries, needs to be conducted. Additionally, using different methodologies like interviews, case studies, or longitudinal studies can help researchers gain a more comprehensive knowledge of learners' strategies. The findings of these studies will hopefully result in a more comprehensive understanding of LLS.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors thank the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for helping them financially. They also thank the STARS students at VIT University, Vellore, who participated in this study.

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Paper received for publication in November, 2022
Paper accepted for publication in December, 2022