Title:

Language Learning Strategy Use:

A study of Pre-Service Teachers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that learners use to assist their progress in developing second or foreign language skills (Oxford, 1990). Knowledge of students' strategy use is important, as this will provide information to teachers concerning the strategy training needs of their students. This paper presents the findings of a study to explore the language learning strategies of 60 pre-service teachers (17 males, 43 females) enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (TESOL) program. Strategy use was assessed through administering the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL), a widely used 50-item self-scoring survey developed by Oxford (1990). Overall, strategy use of pre-service teachers was moderate, with pre-service teachers reporting most frequent use of social strategies, followed by metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, memory and affective strategies. There was no gender difference in pre-service teachers' use of language learning strategies. In conclusion, pedagogical implications of the findings and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Keywords: language learning, strategy use, pre-service teachers, gender difference

INTRODUCTION

Learning strategies and the factors that influence their use have received much attention in recent years since it became widely accepted that learning is a process during which the learner is actively involved and the role of the teacher is to facilitate that process. Strategy use is important as it affects the learners' motivational or affective state or the way in which they select, acquire, organize, or relate knowledge (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Learning strategies differ from teaching strategies in that the learner, not the teacher, exercises control over the operations of the activity. In the area of language learning, there has been much focus on these aspects too, particularly regarding second language (L2) acquisition. Over the past two decades, researchers (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992) have attempted to identify and categorize language learning strategies of good language learners. Studies focused on identifying what good language learners report they do or are observed doing when they learn a second or foreign language. From early studies carried out by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) to taxonomies of strategies that were drawn up by Oxford (1990), to theories of language acquisition which incorporate strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), much work has been done in attempting to identify what might be good language learning strategies.

Language learning strategies are believed to play a vital role in learning a L2 as they assist learners in mastering the forms and functions required for reception and production in the L2 and thus affect achievement (Bialystok, 1979). There have been studies that study the relationship between language learning strategy use and proficiency as well as achievement (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). The use of appropriate language learning strategies

improved proficiency and achievement and at the same time enabled students to take charge of their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction. In this regard, it is extremely important for teachers of a second or foreign language to identify the language learning strategies of their students. An understanding and awareness of learning strategies on the part of teachers as well as their students can provide valuable insights into the process of language learning. Teachers can then provide strategy instruction as well as guided practice to students who lack knowledge or skill in the use of certain language learning strategies.

A review of the literature available showed that in Malaysia there are relatively few documented studies that explored the language learning strategies that students use in learning English, the national language (Bahasa Malaysia), and foreign languages such as Arabic (Mohd. Amin Embi, Juriah Long, & Mohd. Isa Hamzah, 2001). Hence, there is a need for more studies to investigate into the language learning strategies of students in the local setting. This study aimed to advance research in this area through exploring the language learning strategies of B. Ed. (TESOL) pre-service teachers. Specifically, this study aimed to find the answers to the following three questions:

(i)   What are the language learning strategies that pre-service teachers use?

(ii)   How often do pre-service teachers use these strategies?

(iii) Do male and female pre-service teachers differ in their use of language learning strategies?

The findings of this study will prove useful to teacher educators in their efforts to help pre-service teachers improve their proficiency in English. Teacher educators should become more aware of their students' learning strategies in order to orient teaching methods more appropriately. Guiding pre-service teachers in the use of appropriate learning strategies would lead to improved proficiency and achievement overall (Green & Oxford, 1995).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Language Learning Strategies

Early research into language learning strategies was concerned with attempting to establish what good language learning strategies might be. Rubin (1975) suggested that good L2 learners (1) are willing and accurate guessers, (2) have a strong drive to communicate, (3) are often uninhibited, (4) are willing to practice opportunities, (5) monitor their speech as well as that of others, and (6) pay attention to meaning. Naiman, Frolich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) conducted interviews with adults in a major classroom study of learners of French as a second language and suggested that language learning strategies form only one part of a broader picture of what constitutes a 'good language learner'. They argue that further research needs "to study critically the different inventories of learning strategies and techniques and to develop an exhaustive list, clearly related to a learning model" (Naiman et al., 1978, p. 220). This challenge was taken up by O'Malley and his colleagues (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985a, 1985b) in their work with native speakers of Spanish. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) established that three types of strategies, namely metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective, were being used. Within the metacognitive category were those strategies which involve knowing about learning

and controlling learning through planning, monitoring and evaluating learning activity, cognitive strategies included those strategies involving manipulation or transformation of the material to be learned, while social/affective strategies mainly involved the learner in communicative interaction with another person, for example, collaboration with peers and teachers in the learning process.

Oxford (1990, p. 9) claimed that language learning strategies have the following features: (i) contribute to the main goal, that is communicative competence, (ii) allow learners to become more self-directed, (iii) expand the role of teachers, (iv) are problem-oriented, (v) are specific actions taken by the learner, (vi) involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive, (vii) support learning both directly and indirectly, (viii) are not always observable, (ix) are often conscious, (x) can be taught, (xi) are flexible, and (xii) are influenced by a variety of factors. Oxford (1990) developed a system of language learning strategies that is believed (Jones, 1998) to be more comprehensive and detailed than earlier classification models. She saw the aim of language learning strategies as being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. Oxford (1990) divided strategies into two major classes: direct and indirect. Direct strategies, which "involve direct learning and use of the subject matter, in this case a new language" are subdivided into three groups: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies; Indirect strategies, which "contribute indirectly but powerfully to learning" (pp. 11-12) are also subdivided into three groups: metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. According to Oxford (1990), memory strategies such as creating mental linkages and employing actions, aid in entering information into long-term memory and retrieving information when needed for communication. Cognitive strategies, such as analyzing

and reasoning, are used for forming and revising internal mental modes and receiving and producing messages in the target language. Compensation strategies, such as guessing unknown words while listening and reading or using circumlocution in speaking and writing, are needed to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the language. Metacognitive strategies help learners exercise executive control planning, arranging, focusing, and evaluation of their own learning process. Affective strategies enable learners to control feelings, motivation, and attitudes related to language learning. Social strategies, such as asking questions and cooperation with others, facilitate interaction with others, often in a discourse situation. Logically, individuals will apply different strategies depending on their personality, cognitive style, and the task at hand.

Meanwhile, according to Stern (1992, pp. 262-266) there are five main types of language learning strategies, namely management and planning strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative-experiential strategies, interpersonal strategies, and affective strategies. Management and planning strategies are related to the learner's intention to direct his own learning. Cognitive strategies are steps or operations used in learning or problem solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Communicative-experiential strategies, such as circumlocution, gesturing, paraphrasing or asking for repetition or explanation are techniques used by learners so as to keep a conversation going. Interpersonal strategies are those strategies learners use to monitor their own development and evaluate their own performance. Affective strategies are those strategies used to overcome negative feelings, frustration, anxiety, and self-consciousness when trying to use the language. The present study aimed to explore local pre-service teachers' use of language learning strategies categorized according to Oxford's (1990) system of classification.

Gender Differences in the Use of Language Learning Strategies

Most previous research (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer, 1983) show that females reported of significantly greater use of language learning strategies than males did. Politzer (1983) found that females used social learning strategies significantly more than males did. Ehrman and Oxford (1989), in a study involving both students and their instructors, found that females reported significantly greater use of language learning strategies in four areas: general study strategies, functional practice strategies, strategies for searching for and communication of meaning, and self-management strategies. This female dominance in frequency and range of learning strategies was also observed in a study by Oxford and Nyikos (1989) involving 1,200 university students. They found that female learners used formal rule-related practice strategies, general study strategies and conversational input elicitation strategies more frequently than male learners did. Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito and Sumrall (1993) also found that girls showed a number of differences from boys in terms of motivation, achievement, and frequency of strategy use in their study of factors affecting Japanese language achievement for high school students who were enrolled in the Japanese Satellite Program in the USA. However, there have also been studies (Kim, 1995; Oh, 1996; Wafa Abu Shmaris, 2003) that found no significant gender difference in language learning strategy use. Kim (1995) investigated the use of language learning strategies of Korean adult ESL learners and found no significant differences between males and females in the use of strategies. Wafa Abu Shmaris (2003) found no significant gender difference in language learning strategy use among university students in Palestine. Hence, there is as yet no conclusive evidence concerning gender difference in the use of language learning strategies. A further aim of this study was to investigate gender differences in local pre-service teachers' use of language learning strategies.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 60 (17 males, 43 females) pre-service teachers enrolled in the first semester of a B. Ed. (TESOL) program in a teacher education institute in Malaysia. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 22 years (mean age = 20.22 years, *SD* = .49). They were in three intact classes of 20 pre-service teachers each. They were being trained to teach English Language in Malaysian primary schools. Apart from acquiring skills and knowledge in professional, curriculum, and education studies, they have to take English and language studies, which include linguistics, English Literature, and Teaching of English as a L2. All the pre-service teachers have studied English as a subject in school and in the B. Ed. (TESOL) Foundation Program for at least 10 years.

Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The SILL is a widely used self-scoring survey and the structure is based on Oxford's classification system, whereby strategies are grouped into two types: direct (i.e., strategies that directly involve the target language) and indirect. Direct strategies are classified into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies:

- Memory strategies (Items 1-9) are used for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it when need for communication. (e.g., grouping, representing sounds in memory, structured reviewing, using physical response).
- Cognitive strategies (Items 10-23) are used for linking new information with existing schemata and for analyzing and classifying it. Cognitive strategies are responsible for deep

processing, forming and revising internal mental models and receiving and producing messages in the target language (e.g., repeating, getting the idea quickly, analyzing and taking notes).

- Compensation strategies (Items 24-29) include such strategies as guessing and using gestures. Such strategies are needed to fill any gaps in the knowledge of the language. (e.g., switching to the mother tongue, using other clues, getting help and using a synonym).

On the other hand, indirect strategies are divided into metacognitive, affective and social strategies:

- Metacognitive strategies (Items 30-38) are techniques used for organizing, planning, focusing and evaluating one's own learning. (e.g., linking new information with already known one, seeking practice opportunities, and self-monitoring).

- Affective strategies (Items 39-44) are used for handling feelings, attitudes and motivations. (e.g., lowering anxiety by use of music, encouraging oneself and discussing feelings with others).

- Social strategies (Items 45-50) are used for facilitating interaction by asking questions, and cooperating with others in the learning process, (e.g. asking for classification, cooperating with others and developing cultural understanding).

Pre-service teachers were required to respond to the 50 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *never or almost never true for me* to *always or almost always true for me*. Green and Oxford (1995) quote reliability of various forms of SILL using Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency, as .93 to .98. Reliability of SILL for the pre-service teachers in this study (N = 60)

was .90. The content validity for SILL based on independent raters was .99 (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995).

Procedure

Pre-service teachers were informed that they were involved in a study on the learning strategies they use in learning English. The instrument was administered by the researcher in this study. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers. What was important was that they responded according to how well the statements described how they felt or what they did. When asked whether they had any difficulty in understanding any of the statements in the SILL, all of them said they had no problems doing so. Most of the pre-service teachers completed the inventory in 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

As this is a population study, descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data collected. Results regarding the use of language learning strategies are presented in the form of means, standard deviations, and rank order of usage of each category of language learning strategies.

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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Pre-service Teachers' Usage of Language Learning Strategies

This study set out to investigate the frequency and choice of language learning strategies of B. Ed. (TESOL) pre-service teachers. The mean frequency of use of language learning strategies by pre-service teachers (M = 3.44, SD = .44) fell within the range of 2.5-3.4, which, according to

Oxford's SILL Average Analysis is within the range of 'moderate use' of language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). The ten strategies most often used were watching English language TV/movies, paying attention when someone is speaking English, noticing English mistakes, using a word or phrase that means the same thing, encouraging oneself not to be afraid of making mistakes, practicing using English with others, trying to find out how to be a better learner of English, making guesses to understand unfamiliar English words, reading for pleasure, and trying to write notes, messages, letters or reports in English. Conversely, the ten strategies least often used were using flashcards to remember English words, writing down feelings in a diary, physically acting out new English words, using rhymes to remember new English words, talking to someone else about feelings when learning English, planning a schedule so as to have enough time to study English, giving oneself a reward or treat for doing well in English, making up new words English, noticing one's own feelings of nervousness when studying or using English, and reviewing English lessons often.

Regarding the frequency of use of each category of language learning strategies, the ranking of the six categories in the SILL according to the frequency of use was social, metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, memory and affective strategies. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and rank order of usage of each category of strategies by the pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers reported using social strategies (ranked first) more often than the other five strategies. Pre-service teachers appeared to learn English more through interacting with others, asking questions, seeking their help or cooperating with them. The use of metacognitive strategies was ranked second. This shows that pre-service teachers do exercise control of their own cognition through planning, arranging, focusing and evaluating their own learning process.

Meanwhile, resorting to compensation strategies such as guessing and using gestures to aid in comprehension and production purposes was ranked third. The use of cognitive strategies, which involves analysis and reasoning during learning, was ranked fourth. This shows that pre-service teachers do exercise control of their own cognition through planning, arranging, focusing and evaluating their own learning process. The two categories of strategies that were comparatively less often used were memory strategies and affective strategies. These findings suggest that pre-service teachers made relatively less effort to commit what they have learned to long-term memory. They also employed relatively less affective strategies such as control of their feelings, and making an effort to encourage themselves and lower their own level of anxiety, all of which would enhance their learning of English.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Rank Order of Usage of Language Learning Strategies

Language Learning Strategy	Mean	SD	Rank Order of Usage
Memory	3.05	.50	5
Cognitive	3.52	.49	4
Compensation	3.53	.70	3
Metacognitive	3.70	.61	2
Affective	3.02	.71	6
Social	3.78	.68	1
Overall	3.44	.43	-

Gender Differences in the Use of Language Learning Strategies

Another aim of this study was to investigate gender differences in language learning strategy use. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations and rank order of usage of language learning strategies of male and female pre-service teachers. As a comparison of the means shows, there was no difference in the overall mean score of male and female pre-service teachers' usage of language learning strategies. However, there were slight differences in their usage of individual language learning strategies.

Perusal of the means in Table 2 shows that males surpassed females in the use of social, compensation and memory strategies. Male pre-service teachers appeared to learn English through social interaction, guessing or use of circumlocution (compensation strategies) and greater effort at committing to memory what they have learned. Meanwhile, females surpassed males in the use of metacognitive, cognitive and affective strategies. It appears that female pre-service teachers put in more effort at controlling their own cognition (metacognitive strategies), focusing, planning, and doing self-evaluation (cognitive strategies) and take steps to handle their feelings, attitude and motivation (affective strategies) during learning.

Concerning the rank order of usage of language learning strategies, both male and female pre-service teachers reported of high usage of social strategies (ranked 1) while the use of memory strategies and affective strategies were ranked 5 and 6 respectively for males and ranked 6 and 5 respectively for females. The above findings concur with that of researchers such as Kim (1995), Oh (1996), and Wafa Abu Shmaris (2003), who found no significant gender difference in the use of language learning strategies.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations and Rank Order of Usage of Language Learning Strategy Use by

Gender

Category	Gender		Rank Order of Usage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Memory strategies	3.07	3.03	5	6
	(.46)	(.52)		
Cognitive strategies	3.48	3.54	4	3
	(.35)	(.53)		
Compensation strategies	3.74	3.44	2	4
	(.71)	(.68)		
Metacognitve strategies	3.55	3.75	3	2
	(.62)	(.61)		
Affective strategies	2.95	3.07	6	5
	(.48)	(.78)		
Social strategies	3.86	3.75	1	1
	(.53)	(.74)		
Overall	3.44	3.44		
	(.35)	(.46)		

Note. Standard Deviations are in parentheses

CONCLUSION

Summary

The findings in this study show that pre-service teachers reported moderate usage of the six categories of language learning strategies in Oxford's (1990) system of language learning strategies. Pre-service teachers reported of greater use of social strategies and relatively low usage of memory and affective strategies. Overall, there was no gender difference in pre-service teachers' use of language learning strategies.

Implications

In light of the above findings, a number of important pedagogical implications can be put forward. The findings show that the two language learning strategies less often mentioned were memory strategies (ranked 5) and affective strategies (ranked 6). Memory strategies, which involve creating mental linkages and images, help learners to encode and store what they have learned in long-term memory and retrieve information when needed. This strategy is important for pre-service teachers if they want to commit to memory the meaning of new words and language rules they have learned. Pre-service teachers should be encouraged to be more diligent in improving storage and retrieval of information during the learning process. Teacher educators could do this by encouraging them to find out the meaning of new words, make an effort to remember them, and apply and revise what they have learned through suitable learning activities.

The findings also indicate that affective strategies were least often reported by both male and female pre-service teachers. The use of affective strategies is important in helping pre-service

teachers regulate feelings and attitude towards learning English. Teacher educators could perhaps address this problem through affective strategy instruction. Pre-service teachers may not be aware of the need to regulate their emotions during learning. Steps can be taken to alleviate stress through relaxation activities or instruction on stress management. Oxford (1990) suggested three types of affective strategies that can be used to regulate learner attitudes, motivation, and emotions. Among these are strategies for anxiety reduction (using progressive relaxation and deep breathing exercises, music, and laughter), for self-encouragement (making positive statements, taking risks wisely, giving self-rewards), and for monitoring emotions (listening to the body, completing a checklist, writing a language learning diary, and discussing feelings with peers). Kondo and Yang (2004) in their study involving Japanese students, put forward 72 different tactics, which were clustered into five strategy-groups namely preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer-seeking and resignation, to help lower students' levels of anxiety. Previous research (Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1998; Moskowitz, 1999) show that affective strategy instruction enhanced performance and improved students' attitude toward language learning.

Furthermore, in view of the reported moderate use of language learning strategies of these pre-service teachers, there is need to promote strategy awareness and application of the less often mentioned strategies in the teaching and learning of English. Teacher educators can promote the use of these strategies through providing instruction, modeling, and more opportunities to practice the use of these strategies through activities such a debates, group discussion, presentations, simulations, and drama. As these pre-service teachers are going to be future teachers of English in school, the need for them to know and practice the use of language learning strategies cannot be over emphasized.

Suggestions for Further Research

To substantiate the findings, future researchers might want to conduct interviews with pre-service teachers to find out the reasons for their choice and frequency of use of language learning strategies. Interviews could also be used to probe into pre-service teachers' knowledge of language learning strategies, their beliefs about language learning, and their attitude towards learning English. It would be interesting to gain insights into their self-beliefs (for example language anxiety and language self-efficacy) regarding learning English and how this is related to their use of language learning strategies. According to Bernat (2006) motivation to learn a language can be influenced by self-beliefs such as self-concept, self-confidence, anxiety, expectancy and the need to achieve. Anxiety and self-efficacy beliefs have been found to influence the learners' motivation to learn, their performance, and their perseverance in the face of failure both elsewhere (Benson, 2001; Bernat, 2006; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Wolters & Rosenthal, 2000) and locally (Wong, 2005).

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