

The Social Learning Strategies Employed by Libyan Students to Improve English Language Communication Skills

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ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على استخدام الطلاب الليبيين لاستراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية لتحسين مهارات التواصل لديهم باللغة الانجليزية. كما أنها تدرس مدى تأثير اختلاف الجنس ومستوى الكفاءة على ذلك الاستخدام. خضع لهذه الدراسة 60 طالبا ليبيا يدرسون بجامعة طرابلس بقسم اللغة الانجليزية واستخدم الاستبيان المقتبس من اكسفورد (1990) كأداة لجمع البيانات. جمعت البيانات وحللت باستخدام البرنامج الإحصائي SPSS وأكدت نتائج هذه الدراسة على ان الطلاب يستعملون استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية بشكل كبير ومتنوع كما أظهرت الدراسة ان الطلاب الإناث يستعملون تلك الاستراتيجيات بطريقة أكثر فاعليه بينما لم يظهر مستوى الكفاءة اي اختلاف يذكر في الاستخدام. استنادا إلى نتائج هذه الدراسة يوصي الباحثون بتشجيع الطلاب على استعمال هذا النوع من الاستراتيجيات داخل قاعات الدراسة وتحفيزهم على استخدامها بشكل دائم لتطوير مهارات التواصل لديهم مما يساعدهم على تطوير أنفسهم ومجتمعهم مستقبلا.

ABSTRACT

This study attempt to investigate how Libyan students use social strategies to improve their communicative skills. It also examined the differences in using the social learning strategies based on gender and proficiency level. The participants in this study were 60 Libyan students studying at Tripoli University. The research instruments used in this study was a questionnaire. The findings showed that the student tend to socialize with people who have English language exposure in order to improve their English

communication skills. Moreover, the results revealed that the female students employed language learning strategies more effectively than males and there is no significant difference between high and low proficient students. Based on this study, it can be concluded that the use of social strategies must be encouraged in the EFL classroom because they have impact on students' communication skills which may lead to effective professional development in the future specifically in Libya.

Key words: social strategies; communication skills; EFL classroom; TEFL.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is regarded as the crucial tool of all human interaction. The ability to communicate and conveying the message varies from individual -to-individual. The more sophisticated this ability, the greater the learning capacity and vice versa. (Lal, 2007) From this perspective, it can be mentioned that communication nowadays is seen as a vehicle for taking personal and social needs forward. Basically, language plays a vital role in most of communication processes. Therefore, L2 learners give more focus on communicative skills and linguistic issues that assist them to achieve the target language successfully. One of these issues is those related to directly language learning strategies and communication process such as social strategies. Social strategies are very important in the area of communication since these strategies occur between people. According to Oxford (1990), there are three sets of social language learning strategies: Asking Questions, Cooperating with others, and Empathizing with Others.

Among the three, asking questions is the most helpful and comes closest to understanding the meaning. It also helps in conversation by generating response from the partner and shows interest and involvement. Cooperation with others eliminates competition and in its place brings group spirit. (Bremner, 1999) Studies show that cooperative learning results in higher self-esteem, increased confidence, and rapid achievement. Learners do not naturally apply cooperative strategies because of strong emphasis put on

competition by educational institutions. Sometimes competition brings a strong wish to perform better than others, but it often results in anxiety and fear of failure. (Ibid) It is important to help learners change their attitudes from confrontation and competition to cooperation. Empathy is very important in communication. Empathy means to put oneself in someone else situation to understand that persons point of view. Learners can use social strategies to develop cultural understanding and become aware of thoughts and feelings of others. Learners can apply the strategy of cooperating with others by doing something together in the language they are learning. Daily telephone conversation with a friend in the target language is an example to practice the communicative skills(oxford, 1990). Figure 1 shows how the above three subset strategies are subdivided into six specific strategies based on oxford classification (1990).

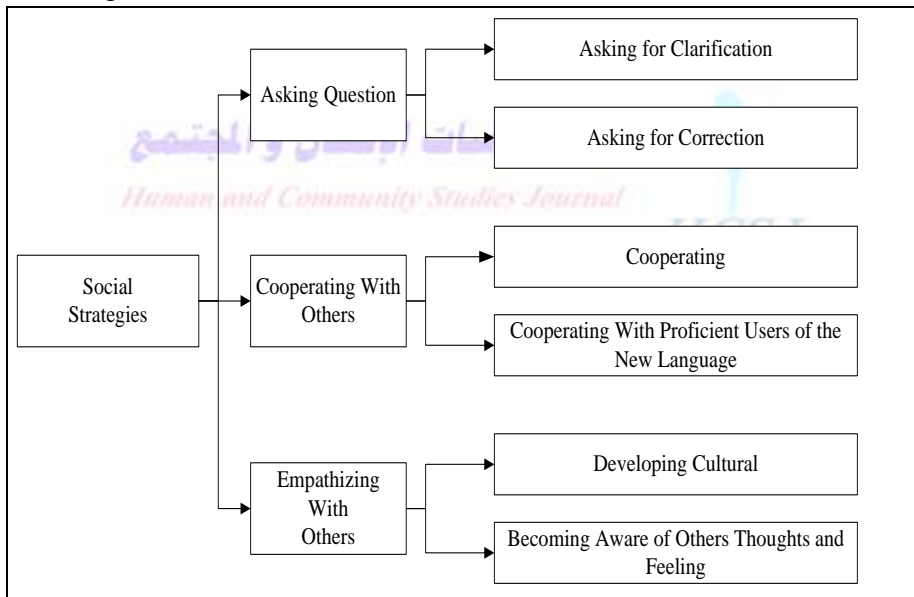


Figure 1: Social Strategies

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Despite the growing body of research in all learning issues, the strategies still occupy the forefront as crucial tools especially in improving the communication skills. Language learners continuously care to use different strategies that help them to enrich their linguistic input. Although many studies have been carried out to get information about learners' strategies and

although the widespread agreement towards the importance of the oral communicative skills, the requisite communicative research is still remarkably lacking in the field of social language learning strategies, more specifically, on Libyan university students. Consequently, this problem is worth exploring because many university students are not aware of how to employ and select such social strategies. This type of strategies might be mastered in order to achieve an explicit success in the matter of using the language as a mean of communication. Therefore, this study could contribute by providing a good insight about this issue among Libyan TEFL students. As a result, the rationale for this study was to figure out the social language learning strategies employed by Libyan students in improving their communication skills at Tripoli University, Libya. Additionally, this study aimed to investigate if there were any differences in using social learning strategies among Libyan TEFL students according to their gender and proficiency level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The educational realm of language learning scope has radically changed over a quarter of century. Most recently, stakeholders shifted their gaze to the strategies that employed by learners to facilitate their use of English. Many demographic variables associated with the field of language research such as gender and level of proficiency.

In terms of gender variable, it has been found the gender difference in many areas of human social development. Studies indicated that females show more interest in social activities than males and females are less competitive and more cooperative than males (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). According to Politzer (1983) who studied learning strategies of 90 undergraduate foreign language students enrolled in French, Spanish and German courses in the U.S. The findings showed that female students used social learning strategies more often than males. These findings gained further support by Chang (2003) who investigated the use of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) by a group of high school students in Taiwan who were learning English. The study found that females significantly surpassed males in the use of LLS as a

whole. The results also showed that females significantly used cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies more frequently than males. The results of Lan's (2005) study of 1,191 Taiwanese elementary school students indicated a significant difference between boys and girls in the frequency of strategy use. Further, Radwan (2010) conducted a study investigated the use of language learning strategies by 128 students majoring in English at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman. Using Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL), the study sought to examine the relationship between the use of language learning strategies (LLS) and gender and English proficiency, measured using a three-way criteria: students' grade point average (GPA) in English courses, study duration in the English Department, and students' perceived self-rating. The findings of the study showed that the students used male students used more social strategies than female students. Moreover, ANOVA results revealed that there no significant difference between high and low proficient students in using social strategies to improve their learning skills.

METHOD

The Participants

In this study, a total of 60 English majors Libyan students were the sample population of this study. Because of the majority of the sample population were females, seventy percent of the sample was females and thirty percent was males. The researchers concentrated on Libyan students at Tripoli University majored in English. Since the respondents were sophomore in English language department at the time the data were collected. The results of this study were hoped to increase the awareness of specialists and educators to tackle this issue of the students in the same case.

The Instruments of the Study

The research instrument was a questionnaire. The questionnaire items of this study were adapted from Oxford (1990). , the questionnaire of this study enabled the subjects to select the social strategy use on a five point Likert scale: (See Table: 1)

Table 1: Scoring System for each SILL Item

Points	Points Label
5	Always or almost always true of me
4	Usually true of me
3	Somewhat true of me
2	Usually not true of me
1	Never or almost never true of me

DATA ANALYSIS

The data of this research were entered to computer utilizing the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software version 17.0 for MS Windows 7. The analysis of the data was relied on the descriptive statistics, and T-test. These statistical items were applied in order to fulfil the objectives of the current study. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means and standard deviations were calculated to summarize the responses to the social language learning strategies questionnaire items.

Whereas, the t-test were used to assess whether the means of gender and two proficiency levels are statistically different from each other. The frequency use criteria of the social learning strategies in this study were adopted from Oxford (1990) as shown in Table 2

Table 2: Oxford's (1990) Criteria of Mean Scores to Understand to Language Learning Strategy Use

High	Always or almost always used	4.5 to 5.0
	Usually used	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5 to 3.4
Low	Generally not used	1.5 to 2.4
	Never or almost never used	1.0 to 1.4

The data was accurately analyzed to allow the researchers to see patterns emerge of the issue and to determine the main items.

THE RESULTS

This study found that Social language learning strategies was high frequently employed by Libyan students. Table 3 exhibits the responses of the students to the statements which concerns about the social strategies. According to the first item "If I do not

understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again”, 36.7 percent reported that they “usually” use this strategy, whereas 29.2 percent pointed out that they “always or almost always” apply this strategy. While 18.3 percent mentioned that they “somewhat” utilized this strategy. A total of 12.5 percent participants stated that they “usually not” interested to use this strategy and just 4 participants reported that “never or almost never” applied this strategy. As response to this item, “I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk”, the participants percentage who mentioned that they “always or almost always” practice the strategy was 32.5 percent and those who reported that they “usually” apply the strategy was 30.8 percent. Likewise, the percentage of participants pertaining to the Likert scale point “somewhat” was 14.2 percent and the point “never or almost never” was 15.8 percent .they were quite similar in applying this strategy. And just 6.7 percent of the participants reported that they “usually not” utilized this strategy. On the other hand, the percentage of the students who “always and almost always” practiced “English with other students” and those students who “usually” used this strategy was exactly the same 29.2 percent. The percentage of the students who reported that they “somewhat” applied this strategy was 20.8 percent. Whereas, 12.5 percents stated that they “usually not” apply this strategy. A total of 10 participants confirmed that they “never or almost never” used this strategy. There were similarities between the percentage of the students who reported that they “always or almost always” and those who mentioned that they “usually” asked “for help from English speakers” were 31.7 percent. Also, the percentage of the participants who reported that they “never or almost never” apply the strategy was 5.8 percent of the participants and the percentage who pointed out that they “usually not” utilized the strategy was 6.7 percent of the participants used this strategy whereas, 24.2 percent of the participants reported that they “somewhat” applied this strategy. However, the number of the participants who stated that they “usually” asked “questions in English” was 37.5 percent of the participants while 34.2 percent of the participants stated that they “always and almost always” used this strategy. A total of 15 percent of the participants reported that they “somewhat” used

this strategy and 8.3 percent of the participants referred that they “usually not” utilized this strategy. Only 5 percent of the participants stated that they “never or almost never” applied this strategy.

Table3: Percentage , Means and Standard Division of Social Strategies

No	Statement	Never or almost never true of me	Usually not true of me.	Somewhat true of me	Usually true of me	Always or almost always true of me	Mean	Std.
		1	2	3	4	5		
1	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	3.3 %	12.5 %	18.3 %	36.7 %	29.2 %	3.7	1.11
2	I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	15.8 %	6.7%	14.2 %	30.8 %	32.5 %	3.5	1.41
3	I practice English with other students.	8.3 %	12.5 %	20.8 %	29.2 %	29.2 %	3.5	1.26
4	I ask for help from English speakers.	5.8 %	6.7%	24.2 %	31.7 %	31.7 %	3.7	1.14
5	I ask questions in English.	5.0 %	8.3%	15%	37.5 %	34.2 %	3.8	1.13
	I try to learn about the culture of English speakers	5.8 %	5.8%	15%	30 %	43.3 %	3.9	1.16
Average		3.76			0.72			

However, 43.3 percent of the participants mentioned that they “always or almost always” tried “to learn about the culture of English speakers”. The number of the participants who stated that they “usually” applied this strategy was 30 percent of the participants while, 15 percent of the participants confirmed that they “somewhat” used this strategy in learning the language. On the other hand, the percentage of the participants who reported that they “never or almost never” apply the strategy and the students’ number who mentioned that they “usually not” used this strategy was exactly the same.

According to the findings, Libyan university students depended heavily on employing social language learning strategies in learning and improving their English. There are two possible justifications for this result. Firstly, social strategy use could be attributed to the learners' unlimited exposure to computer, multimedia, and networking technologies, which in turn permits learners to be engaged in foreign cultures and affords more English input. Libyan students have recently had easier access to authentic English materials including English TV, Internet, English newspaper, etc. With these current advantages of modern technology, university students have had more chances to use social strategies in and out of English classes. Secondly, the nature of teaching at the university might assist the learner to be more freely in asking any issue related to the language learning concept. Also, the discussion chances available more in the university than those in secondary school. This matter might motivate the university learners to be more confident to discuss the ambiguous points in the target language.

Social Strategies Use and Gender

This study showed that the social strategies, the females students scored higher than male students with a significant difference ($p = .00$) as shown in table 4.

Table 4: The Differences between Males and Females in the Usage of social Strategies

Gender category	Male (n=18)		Female (n=42)		T	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Social Strategis	3.49	0.70	3.87	0.69	-2.69	0.008

The research findings reveal that there were significant differences in the strategy uses between male and female Libya learners. The females used the language strategies more effectively than males. There are possible justifications for this result. It might be to say that the culture background could have crucial role since the Libyan female students usually spends more time at home than males which in turn enables them to

concentrates more on developing their own communication skills by using different social strategies. Also, it might be true to say that the females naturally are more interested in socializing than males. So it is easier for them to apply more social strategies than males in learning English and improving their communication skills.

Another possible justification that might be taken into account is that most of the female students of English language prefer to be teachers of English. Thus, they concentrate more on electing and employing various social strategies that assist them in improving their communicative ability.

Social Strategies and Proficiency Level

The difference between high and low proficient students was not significant, as shown in table 5

Table 4: The Differences between high and low proficient students in the Usage of social Strategies

Proficiency level category	Low(n=40)		High(n=20)		T	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Social Strategies	3.66	0.74	3.86	0.67	1.53	0.126

This result might be justified due to the Libyan universities' curriculum which concentrates more on teaching English rather than the strategies used in learning English. Consequently, the high and low proficient students use similar amount of strategies. Another possible justification of the similar usage of social language learning strategies between high and low proficient learners might be related to the instructors and stakeholders themselves. They seem to be indifferent with motivating and encouraging the students to use various social language learning strategies in different communicational environment.

CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the social learning strategies employed by Libyan TEFL university students in improve their communicative skills. The study yielded that Libyan TEFL

students at Tripoli University showed a high average level of social learning strategies use. All categories of social language strategies were employed occasionally by Libyan TEFL students in order to improve their English communicative skills. These findings were in line with the earlier research conducted in ESL learning contexts; ESL learners reported a high learning strategy use in English leaning (Green and Oxford, 1995; Nyikos and Oxford, 1993). On the other hand, this study contradicted with those by Bremner, (1999); Wharton, (2000) who conducted similar studies among EFL students and reported that the EFL learners use language learning strategies at medium level of usage.

The current study also looked at the impact of gender on social learning strategies usage among Libyan university students. This study demonstrated that the demographic variable gender had significant influence on social learning strategies use. However, the female students employed language learning strategies more effectively than males. The second demographic variable that investigated by the present study was Libyan university students' proficiency level and its effect on social strategies usage. The study findings showed that the difference between Libyan students who had a high level of proficiency and those who had low proficiency level were insignificant. The high and low proficient students applied similar learning strategies. Interestingly, this study was not compatible with only one of the previous researches that conducted by (Radwan2007).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the study findings, teacher has to give special focus of social strategies by engage the learners in suitable learning situations to practice this strategy interestingly. Furthermore, the Libyan ministry of education must prepare certain activities that mainly rely on employing these strategies such as weekly English symposiums, seminars and English camps.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To widen the scope of the study, it is highly recommended that investigating the usage of social learning strategies in learning English language should not be restricted to TEFL university students in Tripoli University Campus only. Another study can

look at all the different majors in the university. This will give more accurate data of the findings. It would be interesting also if a similar study in the same area is conducted to compare the present findings with students in other universities or with other nationalities.

Additionally, variables such as personality, the length of English learning experience prior to the study, the length of staying in an ESL environment, age, were not analyzed for their influence on the language learners in this study. It would be fruitful to investigate these variables across EFL and ESL learning environments. The results of such an investigation may clarify why some learners have better language performances over others.

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