

AN INVESTIGATION ON THE USE OF METACOGNITIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES BY BANGLADESHI LEARNERS WITH DIFFERENT PROFICIENCY LEVELS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of metacognitive strategies by Bangladeshi English language learners. The number of total participants in this study was 100 students, 50 at the high proficiency and 50 at the low proficiency level, who were studying English for Academic Purpose courses at the Centre for Languages (CfL), BRAC University. The metacognitive section of Oxford's Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) (1990) was administered to investigate the pattern of the use of metacognitive strategies by the participants. The study discovered that students with low proficiency English language skills use metacognitive strategies more frequently than students with high proficiency skills, and students of both low and high proficiency are frequent users of metacognitive strategies. The findings of this study will help both researchers and language teachers to understand the pattern of metacognitive language learning strategy use by Bangladeshi learners with different proficiency levels.

Key Words: language learning strategies, metacognitive strategies, language proficiency.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, individual learning traits of learners have become an area of major concentration for the researchers in the field of English language teaching (ELT), and a large number of studies have already been conducted to figure out how and what learning traits can facilitate the language learning process. Studies suggest that the use of language learning strategies (LLS) is one of the most important individual language learning traits which makes language learning "easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p.8). In addition, studies in the field of language learning strategy claim that use of language learning strategies has a significant correlation with the proficiency level of the students. Green and Oxford (1995), Kaylani (1996), Lan and Oxford (2003), Oxford (1996), Oxford and Ehrman (1995), Lee and Oxford (2008) and Philips (1991) assert that more proficient learners employ a wider range of strategies more efficiently than less proficient learners. Research in the area of language learning strategies (LLSs) further identified metacognitive language learning strategies as the single most highly preferred and

most frequently used strategy by the students with high proficiency level and the use of metacognitive strategies as a determiner between high and low proficiency students.

Considering the importance of LLSs, and more specifically the importance of metacognitive strategies in learning a new language, this paper attempts to discover the use of metacognitive strategies of Bangladeshi tertiary level students with different proficiency levels. In addition, this paper also explores the use pattern of metacognitive strategies by different proficiency level students, and the relationship between learners' proficiency level and metacognitive strategy use. Though the study is based on the students of BRAC University, it is expected that their use pattern of LLSs will provide a comprehensive idea on the use of LLSs by Bangladeshi tertiary level language learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Language Learning Strategies:

Language learning strategies are the techniques that learners use to facilitate language learning, expand understanding, and promote the production of the

language. Brown (2000) describes language learning strategies as “specific attacks” that we make on a given problem. “They are the moment by moment techniques that we employ to solve problems posed by second language input and output” (p.122). From Brown’s definition, we get a clear idea that strategies are the techniques that learners use to solve language problem and promote language learning and use. Oxford (1990), another well known scholar in the field of LLSs, defines language learning strategies as “... operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information..., specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (as cited in Hsiao and Oxford, 2002, p. 369). Oxford’s definition of language learning strategy is more holistic than the others since she makes it clear that strategies can help a learner in the different stages of learning a language: acquisition, storage, retrieval and use. Oxford and Ehrman (1995) provide another comprehensive definition of language learning strategy as “... the general approaches students are predominantly disposed to use in order to learn a new language” (p. 69). From the above definitions, we can come to an agreement that learning strategies are the tools that learners use often intentionally to accelerate learning and producing the target language.

B. Classification of Language Learning Strategies:

Different researchers have divided language learning strategies in different ways. There is no a consensus about the categorization of language learning strategies. Hsiao and Oxford (2002) say, “exactly how many strategies are available to learners to assist them in L2 learning and how these strategies should be classified are open to debate” (p.365). Nevertheless, from the different researchers’ classification we have a detailed idea about different categories of language learning strategies that the learners frequently use both for learning and using a target language.

C. Oxford’s classification of language learning strategies

Oxford (1990) classifies language learning strategies into two major categories: direct and indirect L2 learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), direct L2 learning strategies are those that directly involve the language being

learned and she reports three types of direct language learning strategies:

1. Memory-related strategies:

Memory strategies, according to Ya-Ling Wu (2008), are techniques that help learners store and review new information, e.g., creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds and reviewing in a structured way.

2. General cognitive strategies :

According to Oxford (1990) Cognitive strategies are skills or steps that involve direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of the target language, such as formal practice with sounds or structures, functional practice in natural interactions, reasoning, translating, analyzing, and note taking.

3. Compensatory strategies:

Oxford (1990) identifies compensation strategies as those that enable learners to make up for their missing knowledge in the process of comprehending or producing the target knowledge, such as educated guess in listening and reading, using gestures, code switching, and using a synonym or description in order to get the meaning across in speaking or writing.

Oxford (1990) further defines indirect language learning strategies as “those that, although not directly involving the target language, nevertheless are necessary or helpful for learning the language” (as cited in Hsiao & Oxford, 2002, p.370). Oxford subdivides indirect language learning strategies into three other sub categories.

1. Metacognitive strategies:

Ya-Ling Wu (2008) defines Oxford’s metacognitive strategies as “steps that learner take to manage or regulate their learning, such as planning and arranging for learning tasks, setting goals and objectives, monitoring the learning process for errors, and evaluating progress” (p.78).

2. Affective strategies:

Oxford (1990) says Affective strategies are the strategies that learners use for anxiety reduction, self- reward, and self-encouragement.

3. Social strategies:

Oxford (1990) suggests Social strategies are actions that involve asking questions, cooperating with others and becoming culturally aware.

D. A closer look in metacognitive strategies:

The concept of meacognition can be defined simply as thinking about one’s own thinking. Meacognitive awareness makes a learner better equipped for facing the difficulties in learning a new language which encompasses the following strategies: thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and self-evaluation of learning after the language activity is completed (Brown, 2000). Anderson (2002) asserts that “use of metacognitive strategies ignites one’s thinking and can lead to more profound learning and improved performance, especially among learners who are struggling” (p.3). In brief, it can be said that metacognitive language learning strategies are the most important strategies that both the language learners and teachers have to take into account to ensure effective learning, especially since findings of the previous research suggest a strong correlation between use of metacognitive strategies and learners’ proficiency level. Referring to the strong correlation between the aforementioned issues, Mingyuh (2001) claims “when a metacognitive strategy was used as an independent variable, the result indicated that the more the students used this particular strategy, the more progress they made in their overall language proficiency” (p.65).

III. METHOD

A. Participants and setting:

The subjects of this study were 100 students from BRAC University’s Centre for Languages (CfL), Bangladesh. CfL is a unique institute that offers English for Academic Purpose courses for all the students of BRAC University. Using a writing and speaking admission test, CfL places its students into different modules on the basis of their proficiency test scores. The modules are beginning, pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced level. This study has chosen the students of Pre-University (the beginning level students) and students of ENG 102 (advanced level students) as its informants.

B. Instrument:

This study used the metacognitive section of Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), a questionnaire which has been used worldwide for the students of EFL and ESL to determine the use of LLSs. The metacognitive

section consists of nine statements, each describing the use of one metacognitive strategy. Participants of this study had to respond to each statement on a 5- point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where the number implies the extent to which the learners use each of the strategies (see Appendix - A).

Table1: Response options and their numerical values

Options for responses	Numerical value for each option
Never or almost never true of me	= 1
Generally not true of me	= 2
Somewhat true of me	= 3
Generally true of me	= 4
Always or almost always true of me	= 5

C. Data Collection:

Data of this study was collected at the end of the semester when the participants were about to complete their language course. Before collecting the data, researcher mentioned the purpose of the survey and made it clear that their response is not going to affect their grades. They were requested to give their responses sincerely. To avoid ambiguity and misinterpretation each of the questions was explained before collecting the responses.

D. Method of data analysis:

This study follows a quantitative method to investigate the research questions. In other words, for the data analysis this research uses descriptive statistics; means, frequencies, standard deviation and percentage. The data have been presented in terms of tables, pie charts and bar diagrams.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The learners have been divided into five categories on the basis of the use of the language learning strategies, which include: very high users (4.5-5.0), high users (3.5-4.4), moderate users (2.5-3.4), low users (1.5-2.4), and very low users (1.0-1.4). Oxford’s (1990) divided the Intensity Analysis Category of SILL into three categories (i.e. high, medium and low), but for the convenience of present research purpose the researcher has divided it into five categories.

Table 2: Intensity Analysis Category of SILL

No	Category	Intensity	Score
1	Very High	Always or almost always true of me	4.5 - 5.0
2	High	Usually true of me	.5 - 4.4
3	Moderate	Somewhat true of me	2.5 - 3.4
4	Low	Usually not true of me	1.5 - 2.4
5	Very low	Never or almost never true of me	1.0- 1.4

A. Which Proficiency Level is the High Users of Metacognitive Strategies?

Table 3: Findings of the use of metacognitive strategies by different proficiency level students.

Proficiency of the students	Number of the students	Mean	Range of individual average	Standard deviation between the mean of low and high proficient students use of metacognitive strategies
Low	50	3.72	4.1-3	0.1
High	50	3.5	4.8-2.1	

The data suggests that the mean use of metacognitive strategies among the low proficient students is 3.72, which according to the intensity analysis of SILL of this study (see Table- 2) means they are high users of metacognitive strategies. The mean of individual response score of these students fluctuates from 4.1 to 3. On the other hand, high proficiency students' data suggest that their mean use of metacognitive strategy is 3.5, and they are also high users of metacognitive strategy. The mean of individual students' responses in this category fluctuates from 4.8 to 2.1.

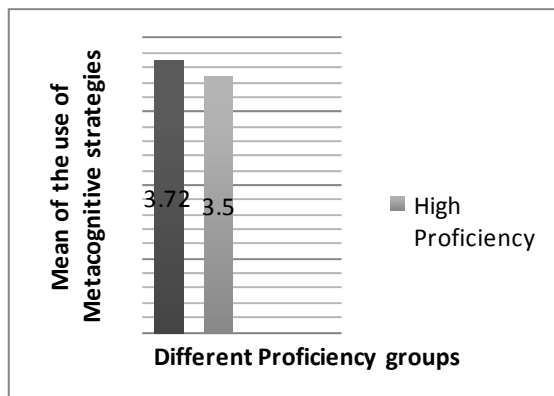


Figure 1: Mean of the use of metacognitive strategies by high and low proficiency students

B. What is the Use Pattern of Metacognitive Strategies by Low Proficiency Students?

In addition to the above findings, a closer look at the data shows that 64% of the low proficiency students are high users and 36% of them are moderate users of metacognitive strategies. Therefore, all the students with low proficiency level are either high users or moderate users of metacognitive strategies. Not even a single student with low proficiency level was reported as very high, low or very low users of metacognitive language learning strategies. As a result, it is clearly evident from the data that students even with low proficiency in BRAC University are aware of the use of metacognitive strategies and this awareness transformed them into either high or moderate users of metacognitive strategies (see Figure-2).

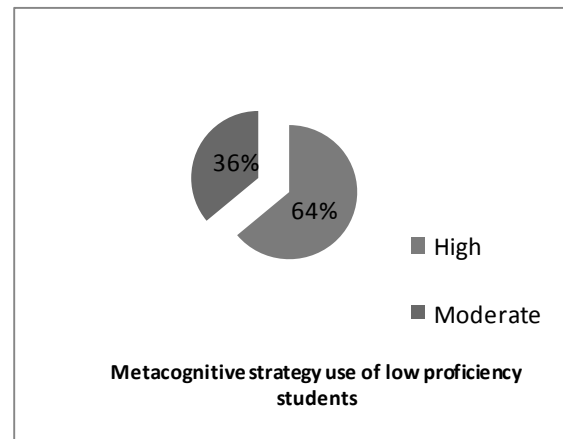


Figure 2: Use of metacognitive strategies by low proficiency students

C. What is the Use Pattern of Metacognitive Strategies by High Proficiency Students?

On the contrary, high proficiency students' data reveals that 6% of them are very high users of metacognitive strategies, 38% are high users, 54% are moderate users and 2% are low users of metacognitive strategy. Unlike the students with low proficiency level, there are a variety of metacognitive strategy users. Still it is evident from the data that a significant number of the participants (98%) are either very high users, high users or moderate users of metacognitive strategies. This finding further suggests that high proficient students are also aware of the use of metacognitive strategies and except 2% the rest of them are very high, high or moderate users of metacognitive strategies (see Figure 3).

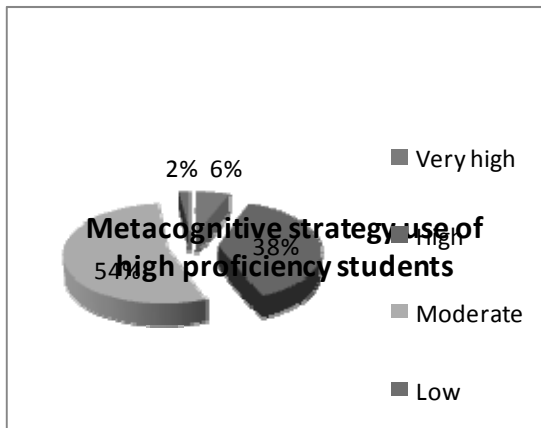


Figure 3: Use of metacognitive strategies by high proficiency students

V. DISCUSSION

It was expected that learners with high proficiency will be using metacognitive strategies more frequently than learners with low proficiency level, but the findings of this study suggest low proficiency students use metacognitive strategies more frequently ($M=3.72$) than high proficiency learners ($M=3.5$). Though this finding of the current study is somewhat paradoxical to the common expectation, it is similar to the findings of O'Malley and Chamot's (1995) study on ESL students, where they found beginning level ESL students use 40 percent more metacognitive strategies than intermediate level proficiency students. Now the question arises whether the setting of this study (i.e. Bangladesh) is EFL or ESL. Although there is no consensus about it, we can reach the conclusion that the BRAC University context is more likely to be an ESL context, where learners use the target language even outside the classroom with their teachers and fellows as a means of everyday communication. There are a number of reasons why ESL learners use more language learning strategies than EFL learners. According to Rao (2006) this tendency of using more language learning can be explained from three different perspectives:

First, ESL learners learn English in an environment where the language is the means of daily survival and communication while EFL learning takes place in settings where the language plays a less major role in communication; therefore ESL learners are more strongly motivated to master the language by using a variety of LLS. Second,

students in ESL settings can have access to numerous authentic materials whereas such resources are hardly available for English learners in EFL situations. Finally, learning English in an English environment provides ESL learners with many interaction opportunities to practise the language, but EFL students learn English primarily in the classroom, which greatly limits their chances for strategy use (P.498-499).

In addition to this, some of the studies in language learning strategies discovered that learners have a tendency to use language learning strategies less frequently as they develop their proficiency level. For instance, Zhou (2010) in his study on the use of language learning strategy by different grade students, discovered that "as for the differences among three grades, students use learning strategies less frequently as they go into higher grades" (p.155).

Another notable point in this regard is motivation of a particular group of students, which can influence the use language learning strategies to a large extent. According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989), "the degree of expressed motivation was the single most powerful influence on the choice of language learning strategies" (p.294). The same study further asserted that more motivated students use language learning strategies more frequently than less motivated students. In this regard, we have to acknowledge the fact that low proficiency students of this study are customarily more motivated than high proficiency students, since low proficiency students are learning English for their survival in BRAC University. If they do not pass the intensive language course successfully, they will not be allowed to study in this university as regular students. As a result, their extrinsic motivation is obviously higher than the advanced students who are already regular students of the university.

Another possible explanation why more proficient students use language learning strategies less frequently might be the language learning tasks that the learners are exposed to. Findings of the previous studies on this issue including O'Malley and Chamot (1995) suggest that less frequent use of language learning strategies by high proficiency students might also be the result of "the nature and difficulty of the tasks to which they were exposed" (p.118).

From the above discussion, we can come to a conclusion that the context of this particular study is more likely to be an ESL setting as a result of which students with low proficiency tend to use more language learning strategies than proficient students. Apart from this, proficient students use language learning strategies less frequently probably because of their proficiency development and as they are now studying in higher grades. In addition, comparatively low motivation and types of language learning activities that the learners are exposed to might be the other probable reason why high proficiency students are using LLS less frequently than low proficiency students.

VI. CONCLUSION

Brown (2000) suggests that in the era of communicative language teaching, it is simply impossible to overlook strategy based instruction (SBI). But it is not feasible to incorporate the concept of LLSs in the language classroom without having an idea of the use of LLSs by the learners of a particular context. Unfortunately, there has not been enough research conducted in a Bangladeshi context to investigate the language learning strategies of our learners. Therefore, this study makes an attempt to investigate the use of metacognitive strategies of the students of a Bangladeshi private university. However, this study has investigated only the use of metacognitive strategies and provides some ideas about the use pattern of one of the most important language learning strategies. Nevertheless, we need more research on this issue in the Bangladeshi context to have a holistic idea about use of all the different types of language learning strategies, so that we can incorporate the concept of LLSs in our language classroom and make language learning easier, faster and more self directed.

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Appendix A- Questionnaire

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) [Metacognitive part]

Male/Female:

Module:

Directions

This form of the STRATEGY INVENTORY FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING (SILL) is for students of English as a second or foreign language. You will find statements about learning English. Please read each statement. On the worksheet, write the response (1,2,3,4, or 5) that tells HOW TRUE OF YOU THE STATEMENT IS.

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

NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER TRUE OF ME

means that the statement is very rarely true of you.

USUALLY NOT TRUE OF ME.

means that the statement is true less than half the time.

SOMEWHAT TRUE OF ME.

means that the statement is true about half the time.

USUALLY TRUE OF ME

means that the statement is true more than half the time

ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS TRUE OF ME

means that the statement is true of you almost always.

Answer in terms of how well the statement describes you. Do not answer how you think you should be, or what other people do. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Put your answers on the Worksheet. Please make no marks on the items. Work as quickly as you can without being careless. This usually takes 20 – 30 minutes to complete. If you have any questions, let the teacher know immediately.

EXAMPLE:

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

Read the item, and choose a response (1 through 5, as above). And write it in the space after the item.

I actively seek out opportunities to talk with native speakers of English.

You have just completed the example item. Answer the rest of the items on the Worksheet.

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

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

1. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.
2. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.
3. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
4. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.
5. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
6. I look for people I can talk to in English.
7. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
8. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.
9. I think about my progress in learning English.

Worksheet for Answering and Scoring the SILL

1. The blanks (.....) are numbered for each item on the SILL.
2. Write your response to each item (write 1,2,3,4, or 5) in each of the blanks.
3. Add up each column. Put the result on the line marked SUM.
4. Divide by the number under SUM to get the average for the column. Round this average off to the nearest tenth, as in 3.4.

1. Q	
2. Q31	
3. Q32	
4. Q33	
5. Q34	
6. Q35	
7. Q36	
8. Q37	
9. Q38	
SUM Part	
SUM ÷ 9	
(Average)	