

# Language Learning Strategy Preferences Of ESL Undergraduate Students: A Case From Pakistan

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## Abstract

Learning is a complex process which deals with the external interaction, environment and internal mental mechanisms. Chamot (1987) defines the process as “learning strategies are processes, techniques, approaches and actions that students take to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information”. The present paper examines the preferences of Language Learning Strategies of undergraduate ESL learners majoring in English. The study tries to investigate the association between the strategies preferred by ESL learners and their language proficiency. The participants of this study are 191 undergraduate students enrolled in Undergraduate English Programs BS English and MA English programs at two public sector universities in Karachi. An adapted self-report questionnaire (SILL; Oxford, 1990) “Strategy Inventory of Language Learning version 7.0” for EFL / ESL contexts is administered for collection of data. The findings of the study show the differences in the Strategies used by the learners securing maximum and minimum CGPA. The former primarily engages in Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies and show less inclination for Compensatory and Affective Strategies. On the contrary, the less successful learners tend to use Compensatory and Affective Strategies and show less preference for Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies. The result of study can be beneficial for both the ESL learners and teachers.

**Key Words:** Language learning strategies, English language, ESL, ESL in Pakistan

## I. Introduction

Language learning is a difficult task, entailing complex processes of cognition, social and emotional challenges (Rababah, 2013). The task can be achieved easily by using strategies that are “special actions, techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take to facilitate the learning and recalling of both linguistic and content area information” (Chamot, 1987). The effective usage of strategies enables their learners to become efficient and proficient users of the language.

Research into language learning field started

in the 1960s. However, there has been a significant shift in exploring the process in variety of context by the researchers. Over the last two decades, the focus has shifted to investigate the mechanism of received information and their application with strategies to learn and understand language. Various researches have been conducted in EFL and ESL context, investigating “Language Learning Strategies” employed by learners.

Pakistan has a rich linguistic profile (Fareed, Ashraf & Mushtaq, 2019). As per ‘The Summer Institute of Linguistic’ the number of living

languages in Pakistan is 72 (Lewis, 2009) but, Rahman (2010) argues that this statement is an exaggeration because of the different names used for the similar language. However, he believes that the correct number is 61 (Rahman, 2010).

According to (Manan, 2014) English language is considered a passport for high paid jobs and upward social mobility in Pakistan. English language is also a co-official language in Pakistan. Influence of English language is strong in various fields such as, education, politics, media, (Fareed, Khan & Akhtar, 2021; Rahman, 1997). In Pakistan, English language teaching is part of the curriculum from the pre-primary and primary level in the private and public schools. Moreover, it is the part of the syllabus as a compulsory subject at tertiary level, whereas possessing excellent language skills is a prerequisite at postgraduate level students.

Pakistani English language learners have different language attainment speed in the same class. Generally, learners are labeled 'good' based on their ability to learn the language structures quickly and use them accurately. Majority of the language learners face difficulties in attaining a good level of language proficiency. Students from diverse cultural background use different "language learning strategies" (Oxford, 1990). Language Learning Strategies effect the academic achievement of learners in other subjects as well (Muelas, & Navarro, 2015). The purpose of this study is to investigate preference of Language Learning Strategies used by Pakistani ESL learners majoring in English and the relationship between the language learning strategies and their language achievements. The study is intended to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Which are the most/least preferred language learning strategies used by undergraduate ESL learners majoring in English?
2. How language learning strategies are linked to the academic performance of undergraduate ESL learners majoring in English?

## 2. Literature Review

Theorists now believe that learning a language is partly innate and partly acquired through interactions with linguistic environment. Language is learned mainly through the environment, and learners generally imitate what they have experienced from their surroundings so they represent the product of their exposure to the surroundings (Taylor & MacKenney, 2003). Similarly, the process of learning occurs unintentionally without any notice in most of the cases (Pritchard, 2013). The above-mentioned ideas highlights that language is learned through observation and imitation. In contrast, there are various language learning theories which emphasize on the internal dynamics of the learning mechanism for the production of efficient and knowledgeable learners (Aljuaid, 2015). The process of learning is not just confined to the academic learning. There are diverse definitions of learning like, "change in behavior because of experience and practice", "knowledge gained through study", the process of "acquisition of knowledge", "individual process of constructing understanding based on experience from a wide range of sources" and "a process by which behavior is changed, shaped and controlled" (Pritchard, 2013.p.56). In short, learning is a complex process which deals with the external interaction with the environment and internal mental mechanisms. Most learning theories focus either on the external or the internal processes. However, learning involves integration of both the external as well as internal processes.

### 2.1 Language Learning Strategies

According to Oxford (1990) "different researchers use different concepts and different terms to define Language Learning Strategies". Hence, numerous definitions are available to offer the foundation of literature review in the field of Language Learning Strategies and

Second Language Acquisition. Primarily, Rubin (1975.p.65) defines “the learning strategies as the technique or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge”. Afterward, she extended the definition as “learning strategies are the strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs,” (Rubin, 1975.p.37). Similarly Bialystok (1978.p.67) specifies that learning strategies are, “optional means for exploiting available information to improve competence in a second language”.Schemeck (1989) states that learning strategy is, “a sequence of procedures for accomplishing something” and concludes from his research that “the implementation of a set of procedures (tactics) for accomplishing something”. Additionally, Weinstein & Mayer (1986.p.41) defines “learning strategies as behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning and that are intended to influence the learner’s encoding process”. “Cognitive strategy which is used to signify operations and procedures that the students may use to acquire, retain, and retrieve different kinds of knowledge and performance are called learning strategies”(Rigney, 1978.p.32). Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) pointed out that “intentional behaviors and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better understand, study new information are called learning strategies”. The concept of learning strategies can be viewed as “learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals, and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques”, (Stern, 1994). Cohen (1998) contributed his thoughts by stating that learning may get enhanced by the conscious selection of specific behaviors and techniques like storing, memory, and practical usage of the language. Chamot (1987) defines “Language Learning Strategies as techniques, approaches and deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information”

which may or may not be noticeable. Likewise, O’Malley & Chamot (1990), proposed the definition of “Language Learning Strategies” as “the special thoughts of processing information of individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information” and one can become a mechanical user of these strategies when applying intentionally. Moreover Oxford (1990.p.35) asserted that “learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning”. Later, she extended her definition by proposing that “specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable in new situations.” Oxford (1990) also stated that “learning strategies” are related to tactics which learners use to finish a task.

## 2.2 Types of Language Learning Strategies

“Affective Strategies”: use of affective strategies is evident in “language learning” situation. Language learners might become frustrated and feel strange during the language learning process. “Good language learners try to create associations of positive affect towards the foreign language and its speakers as well as towards the learning activities involved” ( Stern, 1994, p. 409-414)

“Cognitive Strategies”: are the procedures used in learning or problem solving. Learners need fusion of learning materials analysis and transform it within the context. Subsequently few activities involved in cognitive strategies are explanation, predicting, implicit reasoning, rehearsal, memorization etc.

“Socio affective strategies” are related with the self-organization of material. Learners use the strategies for organizing the resources available for learning .The strategies involved the selective attention and evaluation of learning material while using self and human resources. Organization of material like clustering and scheduling that either individually or within

group is also the part of these strategies (Ellis, 1994).

“Cognitive strategies” comprise the operation and transformation of the learning material used while learning. Learners cooperate directly with what to be presented for learning. Thus, resulting in the limited exposure to the learning activities for the learners. “Metacognitive strategies” denote to improved thinking abilities and development in learning.. Similarly, they evaluate and monitor their learning. Learners accept the responsibility of “self-learning and self- evaluation” after the activity. The strategy involves the advanced skills applied for variety of tasks. Correspondingly the use of “social/affective strategies” deals with the interaction with participants and control over emotion and affective responses to learning.

“Various memory-related strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an orderly string (e.g., acronyms), whole other techniques create learning and retrieval via sounds (e.g., rhyming), images (e.g., a mental picture of the word itself or the meaning of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g., the keyword method), body movement (e.g. total physical response), mechanical means (e.g., flashcards), or location (e.g., on a paper or blackboard)” (Oxford, 2003 .p. 13).

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted with 191 undergraduate students of two public sector universities in Karachi. The participants were enrolled in BS English and MA English programs.

Table 1: Sample of the study

University	Frequency
SILL Scale	191
Student GPA	191

### 3.1 Research Instrument

Data collection was done with the help of adopted self-report questionnaire SILL “Strategy Inventory of Language Learning, version 7.0” for EFL / ESL contexts, developed by Oxford (1990). SILL is considered a valid and reliable instrument and has been used in a number of studies (Bremmer, 1999; Lee, 1998; Park, 1997; Hong, 2006 & Chang, 2007). The calculated Cronbach’s alpha value 0.819 of SILL shows its strong reliability. Reliability is defined as, “the measure of a degree to which a collection of item scores continually measured by an instrument” (Allen & Yen, 2002).

The instrument was piloted with 20 undergraduate students in one of the public sector

university before data collection for this study to see its suitability in the context. The responses of the pilot study were entered and analyzed through SPSS software. Analysis of the pilot survey research shows that Meta cognitive strategy is the most frequently used strategy.

### 3.2 Ethical Consideration

Participation in the survey was voluntary. Written permission for data collection was obtained from heads of both of the Departments. Research participants’ consent was taken and survey forms were also provided to them according to their convenience.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

SPSS version 2.0 IBM was used for quantitative analysis of data. Firstly, the demographic data of the sample were analysed. The descriptive statistics for the analysis of mean, median, and frequency distribution were used to analyze the language learning strategies.

### 4. Findings

Abbreviated forms of the six language learning strategies are sued in the table 2 below. The strategies have been listed from the most frequently used language learning strategies to the least frequent language used learning strategy.

Table 2: Ranking of SILL sub scales according to their mean value.

S no	Strategy	Mean	Rank
1	COG	3.87	1 <sup>st</sup>
2	MCOG	3.63	2 <sup>nd</sup>
3	COMP	3.47	3 <sup>rd</sup>
4	MEM	3.44	4 <sup>th</sup>
5	SOC	3.20	5 <sup>th</sup>
6	AFF	2.88	6 <sup>th</sup>

Ranking of means of six sub scale categories is arranged in descending order. Therefore, the sub scale exhibiting the highest mean value is ranked first. Similarly, the second highest mean value is ranked second and so on. Finally, the lowest mean value is ranked number six in the ranking scale. This is the standardized method of ranking, proposed by (Fisher, 2004). According to Fisher, this is the simplest method of comparing the variables within a group, without any statistical difficulties. Comparison of mean also displays minor variance between the first and second, and third and fourth-ranked strategies. However, the difference between the other two sub scales is

relatively higher.

#### 4.1 Course Achievement Analysis

This part of analysis is related to the second research question. The course marks were obtained and categorized and converted into GPA, using the standardized GPA scale followed by the public sector universities, from where the data were collected. The GPA standard was given in the admission prospectus of undergraduate studies. GPA represents the academic performance of the students, 4 being the highest and 1 being the lowest.

Table 3: Academic performance of ESL undergraduate students of the selected universities

GPA secured at the Scale of	No of students who secured the GPA
4	

4	32
3.8	28
3.6	36
3.4	15
3.2	17
3.0	15
2.8	14
2.6	13
2.4	08
2.2	05
2.0	08
	191

#### 4.2 Relationship between Academic Achievement and SILL Subscales

The analysis of mean of three courses CGPA of every individual proves the performance of ESL learners. Moreover, the performance result was compared with strategies used by individual learners. Primarily, the mean score of every strategy was calculated and the maximum and minimum strategies, out of the six SILL subscales

were identified. After the identification of maximum and minimum SILL subscales strategy used, the relationship of strategies with the CGPA of the individual was counted. The relationship of individual CGPA and maximum and minimum strategy used was documented in the chart form. Following table 4 shows the result of the academic performance of ESL learners, majoring in English and their strategy preferences.

Table 4: Relationship of Learner's Academic Achievement and Their Strategy Preferences

GPA		No of Students Achieved	MAX LLS %	MIN LLS %
4	32	COG 53.125	CO MP 3.12 5	
3	28	COG 64.28	AFF 3.5	
2	5	COMP 60	CO G 4.0	
2	8	AFF 50	CO	

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G  
12.5

For the ranking of CGPA and subscale of SILL, same procedure was repeated as it was done for the ranking of the analysis of the first part of the research that is descending order. The mean of the highest value of strategy and the CGPA were ranked first, followed by the second highest as second and so on.

The analysis of result proves that the most successful learners frequently use Cognitive Strategy while Compensatory and Affective strategies are the least frequent one. Similarly, the less successful learners frequently use Affective and Compensatory strategies and Cognitive strategy is the least frequently used among less successful ESL learners.

## 5. Discussion

These subscales were used with varying frequency of choices by the ESL learners. As their preferences for using strategies were different from each other, therefore the difference of the mean of frequencies shows the preferences of ESL learners using strategies. Affective strategy with 2.88 mean value was the least used strategy, while cognitive strategy with 3.87 mean value was the most preferred strategy used by undergraduate ESL learners majoring in English.

The other remaining strategies, metacognitive, compensatory, memory, social and affective strategies dropped in between these two strategies, in the same sequence but with different mean values. The findings of study reveals that the cognitive strategy was the most frequent strategy this finding is different from the previous studies which ranked the metacognitive strategy as the highest used strategy (Park 1997;

Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; & Radwan 2011). Furthermore (Ehrman & Oxford 1995; Bremner 1999; & Alptekin, 2007) proves that the compensatory strategy is the highly used strategy among all the strategies.

The “cognitive strategy” consists of a variety of applications within it like, reasoning, analyzing, note keeping, summary of the used resources, outlining, reformation of information, schema expansion, practice in the natural L2 setting and practice of sound and structure (Oxford, 2003). As it is obvious that the use of cognitive strategy leaves a good impact on L2 learning making learners a proficient L2 user within the natural setting. Moreover, these strategies helped the learners to achieve good marks and GPA. Therefore, in the relationship of GPA and strategy used, these strategies were ranked at the topmost position.

Following the cognitive strategy, within the subscales of SILL, the Metacognitive strategy was found at the second level of preference by ESL learners. Many other authors have made the statement upon the importance of the metacognitive strategy in language learning process (Samida, 2005; Sung, 2009; Aljuaid, 2010 & Johnson, 2017). The strategy also helped the learners to achieve good marks and GPA.

While analyzing the top three of most used strategies, the findings are similar to many of the researches. The second and third preferred categories are the metacognitive and compensatory strategy, followed by memory strategy at number fourth position in the ranking scale. Although (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Hong

–Nam & Leavell, 2006) found social strategy as the third most used strategy. However, social strategy ranked at number five in the findings of this study. The diminishing frequency of memory strategy, among ESL learners, may suggest their awareness about the less effective value of the strategy in the process of learning.

“Affective strategy” was stated as the least preferred strategy by the ESL learners, majoring in English. “Affective strategies are generally found to be the least preferred strategy category”, (Ehrman and Oxford, 1995), tracked by memory strategy (Ehrman & Oxford 1995; Bremner 1999). Radwan (2011) found that “memory strategies” were stated as being used the least, followed by “affective strategies” and the participants, surprisingly reported using compensation strategies at the least position.

As stated in table 4 the high GPA achiever frequently used cognitive strategy and less frequently used Affective strategy, although the low GPA achievers used Affective and Compensatory strategies more than cognitive strategy. Similar findings were recorded by (Rubin, 1975; Rigney, 1978; Stern, 1975).

## 6. Conclusion

Cognitive strategy is the most preferred strategy of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners majoring in English, while affective strategy is the least favored one. The other remaining strategies, metacognitive, compensatory, memory, social and affective strategies are between the two strategies, in the same sequence as listed. Furthermore, the academic performance of ESL learners has a significant positive relationship with the strategy used. Those students who secured the maximum CGPA showed the greatest use of cognitive strategy and lowest use of affective strategy. On the contrary students who secured the lowest CGPA exhibited maximum practice of affective and compensatory strategies and minimum practice of cognitive and

metacognitive strategies.

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