

Language Learning Strategies of Kurdish EFL Learners: High Achievers versus Low Achievers¹

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Abstract

It has been long believed that students' learning techniques and strategies could distinguish between successful and unsuccessful student performance. Therefore, this study aimed to examine high- and low-achieving students' use of the most common learning strategies. For this purpose, 160 students (80 high achievers, and 80 low achievers) were selected as student-participants, and Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* was used as the data collection instrument. The results showed that high achievers use metacognitive strategies most frequently, while they use affective strategies the least frequently. On the other hand, low achievers use compensation strategies most frequently and social strategies the least frequently.

Resumen

Durante mucho tiempo se ha creído que las técnicas y estrategias de aprendizaje de los estudiantes podrían distinguir entre el desempeño exitoso y no exitoso de los estudiantes. Por lo tanto, este estudio tuvo como objetivo examinar el uso de las estrategias de aprendizaje más comunes por parte de los estudiantes de alto y bajo rendimiento. Para este propósito, 160 estudiantes (80 de alto rendimiento y 80 de bajo rendimiento) fueron seleccionados como estudiantes-participantes, y se utilizó el Inventario de *Estrategias para el Aprendizaje de Idiomas (SILL)* de Oxford (1990) como instrumento de recopilación de datos. Los resultados mostraron que los alumnos de alto rendimiento utilizan estrategias metacognitivas con mayor frecuencia, mientras que utilizan estrategias afectivas con menor frecuencia. Por otro lado, los alumnos de bajo rendimiento utilizan estrategias de compensación con mayor frecuencia y estrategias sociales con menor frecuencia.

Introduction

Learning is the ultimate goal of education, and successful learners are the fruit of a successful education system. It is important to know how learning takes place and how high achievers play a role in their own learning. On the other hand, unsuccessful learners or low achievers fail in the process of learning, so the ways through which they try to learn can be considered less effective and less efficient. Williams and Burden (1997) believed that the differences in learning could possibly be attributed to the learning strategies used by the learners. The relationship between learning and language learning strategies has been studied for a number of years. Some early studies were conducted on the concept of the utilization of language learning strategies (Hosenfeld, 1976; Stern, 1975). Since then learning strategies have become very popular as strategic behaviors in learning.

Learning strategies have a constant positive relationship with second language (L2) competency and good course results, which has prompted the deployment of strategy training among students studying both English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL). Some earlier studies have presented the concepts of strategies more elaborately (Chamot, 1987; O'Malley et al., 1985). Then during the 1990s, other studies (Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1996) investigated the use of language learning strategies for confirmatory factor analysis. Gradually, the concept of strategy and its application in language learning attracted the attention of many scholars (Cohen, 2011; Griffiths, 2008; Oxford, 2011). According to their findings, successful language learners report using a greater variety of learning tactics than less successful pupils. Habók & Magyar (2018). found that more proficient students employed various language learning strategies more frequently than less skilled students. Balci, & Ügüten (2018). Revealed to other data, a high positive link between learning technique utilization and language competency was identified in a different study where advanced language learners reported using learning strategies more frequently than primary pupils. This suggests that this concept has created enormous interest and researchers have continued to do studies in this area. Most of these studies have followed two major goals. The first was to explore and compare the learning strategies utilized by learners with high and low levels of achievement. The second goal was to provide less successful learners with remedial instructions that assist them to increase their levels of achievement and success in language learning (Chamot, 2001). Researchers found that language learners employ various language strategies either consciously or unconsciously (Dreyer &

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Oxford, 1996; Harris, 2003; Wharton, 2000).) On the other hand, some other scholars suggested a strong relationship between high uses of strategy and success or high levels of achievement in language learning (Griffiths, 2003; Oxford, 1990). To be more specific, a successful learner is the one who uses learning strategies appropriately and more effectively when they are needed. Language learning strategies help learners store, retain, and produce the target language whenever needed, and in other words, it directly affects their learning of the second or foreign language (Forbes, 2018). A question arises: What learning strategies do the successful learners adopt and use that are different from those used by unsuccessful ones. Therefore, comparing the learning strategies of these two groups of learners can help enhance English language education (ELE) in Iraq.

Even though this topic is often studied in many parts of the world, there have been few studies on language learning strategies in the context of the Kurdistan region of Iraq and these have been limited to a specific skill or subskill, such as vocabulary (e.g., Abdulrazaq, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to explore the most frequent learning strategies of EFL students in the context of Iraq and investigate their relationship with the academic achievements of these students. It investigates the learning strategies of more successful and less successful English language learners. The main objective of the current research is to identify the strategies that high and low achievers use. Therefore, this study aims at responding to the following research question:

Are there any differences between the types of language learning strategies used by high-achieving and low-achieving Kurdish EFL students?

Review of Literature

Scholars have presented various definitions for language learning strategies. Oxford (1990) defined strategies as "specific actions were taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Rubin (1975) defined strategies as the technologies or devices that learners may employ to gain knowledge. Dansereau (1985) referred to strategies as systematic procedures that help learners enhance their level of acquisition, retention, retrieval, and performance.

Simsek and Balaban (2010) discuss several types of strategies that students can use, noting that these strategies can vary from one learner to another. Simsek and Balaban (2010) attribute these differences to the uniqueness of individual students in every aspect. According to Gerami and Ghareh Baighloub (2011) the environment might be the factor which affects the students' use of different language learning strategies, due to the context-dependent and socially-mediated nature of language. In this regard, Simsek and Balaban (2010) also indicated that selection and implementation of different strategies can depend on instructional variables including types of feedback, types of domains, amount of time, individual differences, the required level of mastery, ways of measurement, teaching methods, and learning technologies.

Different classifications for learning strategies have been proposed by different researchers. Rubin (1981) categorized learning strategies into social strategies and communication strategies. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) classified them into the five main categories of motivation, organization, rehearsal, metacognition, and elaboration. Oxford (1990) distinguished direct strategies, which involve mental processing of L2 language, and indirect strategies, which help students with language learning by indirectly involving the target language. In this classification, used in this study, direct language learning strategies are divided into three categories: compensation strategies, memory strategies, and cognitive strategies. In each category, language is processed for different purposes and in different ways. Similarly, indirect strategies are classified into three categories: social strategies, affective strategies, and metacognitive strategies. Empirical studies have been conducted recently concerning the type of strategies used by learners with high and low academic achievement. The rest of this section will summarize results of these studies.

Simsek and Balaban's (2010) study showed that high achievers or successful learners use better, more varied learning strategies than unsuccessful ones. Similarly, Gerami and Ghareh Baighloub (2011) found that successful students used different forms of language learning strategies and used more learning strategies than unsuccessful learners. They also found that successful students used metacognitive strategies more frequently while unsuccessful students tended to use surface-level cognitive strategies. Rustam et al. (2015) also indicated that successful and unsuccessful students use different types of learning strategies, with metacognitive strategies being the most commonly used among high achievers

and social strategies being the most prevalent among low achievers. Hagos and Deneke (2015) conducted a comparative analysis of the use of vocabulary learning strategies by students of four Ethiopian universities. The randomly selected participants were divided into two groups based on their level of achievement, namely high achievers and low achievers. Using a questionnaire and an interview, both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained which were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics and content analysis, respectively. Their study suggested that the use of vocabulary learning strategies like determination, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies was more frequent in high achievers than low achievers. Low achievers, on the other hand, were significantly better at utilizing some subcategories of social strategies even though both groups were generally poor users of the social strategies. The findings of the study indicated that high achievers use most of the learning strategies better than low achievers. However no statistically significant difference was observed.

Javed and Ali (2018) sought to identify language learning strategies among high and low achievers using SILL. They found that participants employed comprehension and metacognitive strategies among other strategies. In addition, females' use of language strategies was more frequent than their male counterparts, and high achievers made more use than low achievers of strategies like memory strategies, cognitive strategies, comprehension strategies, metacognitive strategies, compensatory strategies, social strategies, and affective strategies. Samperio Sanchez (2019) attempted to identify the strategies shared by both high and low achievers among 57 language learners in Mexico. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered through SILL and ten individual semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed no significant discrepancy in terms of frequency of using strategy between the two groups. However, the study found that high and low achieving students differed in metacognitive and memory strategies, and that high achievers had a goal-oriented use of strategies. In contrast, low achievers' use of strategies was not much focused on their goals.

In a study conducted on Indonesian students, Tunga (2021) investigated the cognitive strategies that high achievers and low achievers used in critical reading texts. After analyzing the qualitative data collected by observation sessions and retrospective interviews, no meaningful difference was found between the two groups in terms of the number of cognitive strategies. In addition, most of the strategies they employed were the same. However, there were some differences in the kinds of strategies selected: high achievers employed some cognitive strategies such as resourcing, repetition, summarizing, and inferencing, whereas low achievers utilized resourcing, repetition, and summarizing cognitive strategies. In addition, high achievers seemed to use cognitive strategies more effectively than low achievers in performing several critical reading tasks.

Khotimah (2020) examined the use of learning strategies and the factors involved in strategy selection by high achieving learners in an international Islamic school in Indonesia. The study also attempted to investigate the practicality of teaching learning strategies. The data was collected through classroom observation, a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. The results indicate that memory strategies and affective strategies were applied by high achieving learners, and that two influential factors contributing to the choice of strategy by high achievers were the teacher's influence and the learners' intelligence. The teacher indirectly influenced strategy selection through their choice of teaching methods and approaches to exploitation of learning strategies. Meanwhile, Learners with higher levels of intelligence used more effective learning strategies.

By conducting a mixed-method research, Taheri et al. (2020) explored the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' use of language learning strategies and their level of achievement in four language skills. They also concentrated on identifying the difference between low and high achievers in terms of the frequency and the type of strategies they utilized while learning each of the four language skills. After administering SILL (Oxford, 1990) to 120 EFL learners, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine learners' perception of the relationship between their use of language learning strategies and their level of achievement in four skills. The quantitative results were in line with qualitative results and confirmed that most of the learners considered the use of the strategies to be highly influential and advantageous in their language achievement. Moreover, the findings pointed out that high achievers frequently applied compensation, affective, and cognitive strategies, while low achievers employed social, metacognitive, and memory strategies more often than other strategies.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were randomly selected from all EFL senior high school students studying in Erbil, located in Kurdistan Region, Iraq. The number of selected participants at the beginning was 240 students. Then based on the results of a multiple-choice English language midterm exam, an equal number of high achievers (n=80) and low achievers (n=80) were chosen as successful and unsuccessful learners as participants in the study, and the rest of the students were excluded from the study as average achievers.

All of the participants were briefly informed about the goals and nature of the study prior to the composition writing exam and the interview session in order to avoid affecting the results and to avoid any potential negative impacts on the validity of the existing data. All participants received assurances regarding the privacy and confidentiality of the information they provided, as the researcher will be the only person with access to the entire set of data and will only use it for this study.

The majority of the teachers were reluctant to allow sound recording of the interview before it began because they said they wouldn't feel comfortable being interviewed. In this situation, consent was secured from each participant before the interview began.

It must be mentioned that before the data collection process took place in the schools of Erbil, permission was given by the Ministry of Education and the local Province Administration for Education.

Instruments

Two research instruments were used in this study, a questionnaire and an English language midterm exam.

English Language Midterm Exam

To distinguish between high achievers and low achievers, a midterm test was developed based on the contents of the coursebook *Sunrise, Book 12*, published by Macmillan which the participants had used during the year. The test consisted of 30 multiple-choice items related to grammar and 30 multiple-choice items related to vocabulary. The test was piloted on twenty learners at the same level as participants of the study. In addition, two experienced university professors were consulted to verify the content validity of the test items. Lastly, the reliability of the test was calculated as 0.82 using KR 21 formula.

Questionnaire

To get information about the types of language learning strategies used by participants, and their frequency of use, the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990) was used in this study. This questionnaire includes 50 items in six major strategy groups, and participants respond using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 is defined as *Never or Almost Never*, and 5 is defined as *Always or Almost always true of me* (Oxford, 1990). High frequency of strategy use is defined a mean of 3.5 to 5, while low frequency of strategy use is defined as mean of 1.0 to 2.49. Medium frequency of strategy use (mean of 2.5 to 3.49) is not considered in this study.

Data Collection Procedure

As mentioned above, the midterm test was piloted with twenty participants with similar characteristics to the target sample. Following the pilot, inappropriate items were removed and modified. Then, the test was checked by two experienced university professors and their comments were applied to a final revision of the test. The midterm exam was administered to all 240 randomly selected high school students. Based on the results of the exam, the students were divided into three groups: high achievers, mid achievers, and low achievers. Since this study focuses on high and low achievers, the mid achievers were not included in this study. SILL questionnaires were administered to high achievers and low achievers under confidential conditions. Forty minutes were allocated to the students in order to fill out the questionnaire.

Results

SPSS software was used for the descriptive statistics related to differences in the use of language learning strategies between high achievers and low achievers. Results are displayed in Table 1, including means and standard deviations for learners' Likert scale responses for each strategy. The strategies are

presented in Oxford’s (1990) categories: memory strategies, compensative strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

Items		High achievers		Low achievers	
		M	S.D.	M	S.D.
Memory strategies					
1	I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in the L2.	4.41	0.937	3.70	1.586
2	I use new L2 words in a sentence so I can remember them.	3.73	1.475	2.49	1.180
3	I connect the sound of a new L2 word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	3.71	1.193	3.48	1.190
4	I remember a new L2 word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	3.61	1.142	3.95	1.321
5	I use rhymes to remember new L2 words				
6	I use flashcards to remember new L2 words	3.91	1.224	3.69	1.249
7	I physically act out new L2 words	2.90	1.437	3.26	1.412
8	I review L2 lessons often	2.36	1.183	3.02	1.350
9	I remember new L2 words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	4.12	1.048	3.40	1.506
Cognitive strategies					
10	I say or write new L2 words several times	3.25	1.428	4.30	1.024
11	I try to talk like native L2 speakers.	3.62	1.277	3.83	1.320
12	I practice the sounds of L2.	2.91	0.957	3.99	1.049
13	I use the L2 words I know in different ways	4.14	1.064	3.71	1.105
14	I start conversations in the L2.	3.29	1.544	3.17	1.199
15	I watch L2 language TV shows spoken in L2 or go to movies spoken in L2.	3.60	1.259	3.85	1.323
16	I read for pleasure in the L2.	3.54	0.980	2.44	1.241
17	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in the L2.	3.54	1.055	3.44	1.123
18	I first skim an L2 passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	3.46	1.340	3.81	1.284
19	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in the L2.	4.06	1.060	4.05	1.231
20	I try to find patterns in the L2.	3.49	1.212	3.92	1.188
21	I find the meaning of an L2 word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	3.45	1.200	3.88	1.140
22	I try not to translate word for word.	3.70	1.277	2.59	1.393
23	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in the L2.	3.20	1.084	2.78	1.125
Compensation strategy					
24	To understand unfamiliar L2 words, I make guesses.	3.84	1.084	4.07	1.134
25	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the L2, I use gestures.	3.91	1.127	4.35	0.781
26	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the L2.	3.19	1.360	4.36	0.830
27	I read L2 without looking up every new word.	3.76	1.245	2.31	1.612
28	I try to guess what the other person will say next in the L2.	3.76	1.214	3.79	1.219
29	If I can't think of an L2 word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	4.25	1.073	4.40	1.026
Metacognitive strategies					
30	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my L2.	4.39	0.921	3.02	1.242
31	I notice my L2 mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	4.24	0.958	4.27	0.941
32	I pay attention when someone is speaking L2.	4.16	1.174	3.65	1.510
33	I try to find out how to be a better learner of L2.	4.16	1.119	2.94	1.435
34	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study L2.	4.11	1.079	2.91	1.469
35	I look for people I can talk to in L2.	3.92	1.016	3.06	1.372
36	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in L2.	3.99	0.987	3.17	1.178
37	I have clear goals for improving my L2 skills.	4.31	0.988	2.95	1.431
38	I think about my progress in learning L2.	4.14	1.403	3.58	1.123
39	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using L2.				
40	I encourage myself to speak L2 even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	2.71	1.234	3.34	1.270
41	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in L2.	2.95	1.221	2.45	1.282
42	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using L2.	2.79	1.166	2.46	0.871
43	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	3.60	1.197	3.94	0.972
44	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning L2.	2.14	1.270	2.05	0.967
Social strategies					
45	If I do not understand something in L2, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	4.16	1.251	2.32	1.271
46	I ask L2 speakers to correct me when I talk.	4.12	1.100	1.90	1.001
47	I practice L2 with other students.	4.00	1.125	2.41	1.209
48	I ask for help from L2 speakers.	3.74	1.046	2.19	1.159
49	I ask questions in L2.	3.80	1.143	2.33	1.156
50	I try to learn about the culture of L2 speakers.	3.86	1.370	2.58	1.271

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for participants’ responses to questionnaire items

Table 2 summarizes these responses by category. It shows the total mean score of the participants' responses to the items related to the six types of language learning strategies. Metacognitive strategies (M=4.16) are the most frequently used type of strategy by high achievers and affective strategies (M=3.52) are the least frequently used strategy by successful learners. On the other hand, low achievers used compensation strategies (M=3.88) most often and used social strategies (M=2.29) the least often.

Type of strategy	High achievers			Low achievers		
	Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD	Rank
Social	3.94	1.181	2	2.29	1.194	6
Compensation	3.79	1.223	3	3.88	1.364	1
Metacognitive	4.16	1.083	1	3.28	1.376	4
Affective	2.73	1.344	4	2.71	1.296	5
Memory	3.63	1.339	5	3.46	1.401	3
Cognitive	3.52	1.230	6	3.55	1.320	2

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the participants' use of each type of strategy

Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study both high achievers and low achievers employed the same learning strategies, but they used those strategies with different frequencies. The strategies utilized most frequently by high achievers were the metacognitive strategies followed by compensation, social, memory, cognitive, and affective strategies in order of frequency. The finding that high achievers adopt metacognitive strategies more than other strategies is consistent with previous studies (Hagos & Deneke, 2015; Javed & Ali, 2018). In addition, cognitive and affective strategies were among the least frequent strategies utilized by high achievers, contrary to the findings of earlier researchers like Tunga (2021) and Taheri et al. (2020), who pointed out that high achievers used these strategies effectively. Concerning the use of strategies by low achievers both researchers found that they used compensation strategies more most frequently, followed by cognitive, memory, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies in order of frequency. This finding shows some similarities and differences to results from Taheri et al. (2020), who found that memory strategies were one of the most frequent strategies used by low achievers, but who also reported that low achievers frequently used social strategies while in the current study they were the least frequent strategy employed by this group of learners.

Based on the finding that successful learners make frequent use of metacognitive strategies, it appears that this use may be beneficial for Kurdish EFL learners. Teachers should consider encouraging students to use metacognitive strategies more. The study also found that unsuccessful learners use social strategies less than other types of strategies, while successful learners use them frequently (Rank 2). Teachers should consider training unsuccessful learners to use these types of strategies in the best way possible in order to help them to achieve success in their language learning process.

This study has implications for learners, teachers, instructional designers, and generally the whole education system. Learners can benefit from information about the most effective strategies used by successful students, so that they can implement them in their learning. For teachers, knowing about the most commonly used strategies that students adopt is beneficial in choosing and implementing the best and most effective teaching practices. Instructional designers can also benefit from the results of this study, since they are responsible for creating instructional systems that give importance to the learning strategies of all students in every teaching-learning context.

Limitations and Future Research Considerations

The most evident shortcoming noticed in the current study is the lack of qualitative measures such as semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. As it was done in previous studies, these qualitative measures could present a better validation of the findings of the study. Moreover, factors like age and gender, and type of personality can have a significant effect on results, but they were not considered in this study. Finally, this study considered only high achievers and low achievers; while the use of strategies by mid achievers was not investigated.

It is suggested that future scholars follow up this study with a focus on strategies used by learners in each of four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) individually. Also, future researchers should include interviews to elicit the learners' ideas concerning their use of strategies. Furthermore, future researchers should increase the generalizability of the findings by replicating this study in other schools located in different cities with different ages and genders of participants. This study investigated

the use of strategies by high and low achievers; future research needs to be conducted on the investigation of the use of strategy by mid-achievers and comparing them with high and low achievers. Finally, future researchers are expected to investigate the relationship between students personality type with their use of language learning strategies.

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