



# IDENTIFYING LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY EFL STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

**Falah Mohammed Theyab, Ph. D**

University of Telafer

[falahaltheyab@gmail.com](mailto:falahaltheyab@gmail.com)

[falah.m.theyab@uotelafer.edu.iq](mailto:falah.m.theyab@uotelafer.edu.iq)

**Abstract:** The present study investigate language learning strategies adopted by EFL students at university level. It aims at classifying the types of strategies employed. The study sheds light on language four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. A questionnaire of closed-ended type was used, distributed to a sample of 40 students. The study posits that a majority of EFL students favor metacognitive strategies. Results indicate the following: In listening skills, cognitive strategies are prominent, followed by social and metacognitive strategies, indicating active engagement in understanding spoken language. Conversely, metacognitive strategies are preferred in speaking skills, with cognitive strategies and social strategies supporting proficiency development. Within the writing skills, EFL students preferred metacognitive strategies followed by cognitive strategies, and social strategies in later stages. In reading skills, the preference went to social strategies, then followed by cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies occupied the last stage within reading skills. The results indicate that EFL students largely favor metacognitive strategies over other types to boost their language skills.

*Keywords: cognitive, metacognitive, social strategies, EFL students, language learning strategies.*

## 1.0 Introduction

Recognizing language learning strategies is seen as an aspect, for students and educators looking to improve language proficiency. Researchers have pinpointed types of these strategies, within the current study the focus on the ones; cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Cognitive methods like visualization and repetition aid learners in comprehending and retaining language information effectively. Metacognitive practices, such, as goal setting and self-reflection empower students to better organize their learning process and boost their language abilities. Social methods, like group learning and language exchanges, offer essential chances for practicing communication and gaining cultural insights.

Teachers benefit from recognizing and supporting students' strategies to provide tailored instruction and create a conducive learning environment. By encouraging effective strategies, teachers can facilitate efficient language acquisition and skill development. Recognizing and employing these strategies can result in better communication skills, improved retention of knowledge, and higher overall language proficiency for students. Overall, grasping

language learning strategies is advantageous for both students and instructors, as it fosters communication abilities, enhances knowledge retention, and boosts overall language competence within a supportive and engaging learning atmosphere.

### **1.1 The Problem**

EFL teachers deal with students with different language learning strategies without considering the specific type they use. Also a great number of students especially, EFL students are not conscious of the type of strategies being utilized and the importance of the role these strategies play.

### **1.2 The Objectives**

1. To identify and investigate language learning strategies used by EFL students at university level.
2. To investigate the language learning strategies among the four skills.

### **1.3 The Hypothesis**

1. The majority of EFL students use the metacognitive strategy while the other types namely cognitive and social strategies come after respectively.
2. Language learning strategies are employed in different ways across the four language skills.

### **1.4 The Questions**

3. What are the predominant language learning strategies employed by EFL students across the four language skills?
4. Do language learning strategies vary in their application across the four language skills?

### **1.5 The Value**

The value of the study is expected to be of much value to EFL students and to teachers, specifically EFL teachers.

## **2.0 Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Language Learning Strategies**

Language learning strategies (henceforth LLSs) are steps that students follow to support their own learning process. They are essential for language learning because they are considered as tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is important for developing communicative competence According to Rigney (1978), LLSs are described as deliberate actions or behaviors that language learners frequently use to improve their ability to acquire, store, remember, recall, and apply new information. They are primarily concerned with the students and the way that they go about the process of learning a second or foreign language (Graham,1997).

LLSs, are steps or actions taken by language learners to enhance any aspect of their learning. Oxford (1990) states that LLSs are “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use—often consciously—to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2”. To Ernesto (2001), LLSs are the behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning intended to influence the learner's encoding process. According to Oxford, (1990), They are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self - directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.

LLSs seem to be specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. “Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability”. (Oxford,1993, p. 18)

Shatz (2014) argues that LLSs are thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very outset of learning to the most advanced levels of target language performance.

Many studies have been made to identify the range and nature of the techniques used by students. Some of these studies have highlighted important issues regarding what makes a good language learner and these are discussed later. Yet less attention has been paid to the way in which advanced learners learn and to how teachers can encourage them to use effective strategies.

## **2.2 The Characteristics of Language Learning Strategies**

There are a number of basic characteristics generally accepted view of LLSs. Lessard (1997) mentions the following characteristics.

- LLSs are learner generated; they are steps taken by language learners.
- LLSs enhance language learning and help develop language competence, as reflected in the learner's skills in listening, speaking, reading, or writing the L2 or FL.
- LLSs may be visible (behaviours, steps, techniques, etc.) or unseen (thoughts, mental processes).
- LLSs involve information and memory (vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, etc.).

LLS, as outlined by Oxford (1990), are characterized by several key points:

- They promote self-directed learning, enabling learners to take control of their learning process.
- LLSs expand the role of language teachers to include guiding students in strategy development and application.
- They focus on addressing specific language learning problems through personalized strategies.
- LLSs encompass various dimensions beyond just cognitive aspects, including metacognitive and affective elements.
- These strategies can be explicitly taught and learned, providing students with a toolkit for effective language learning.
- LLSs offer flexibility in their application, allowing learners to adapt strategies to their individual needs and preferences.
- They are influenced by a variety of factors, such as motivation and learning environment, emphasizing the importance of considering these factors in implementing LLS effectively.

## **2.3 Classification of Language Learning Strategies**

LLSs have been classified differently. There is no consensus on what constitutes a learning strategy in second language learning or how these differ from other types of learner activities. Learning, teaching and communication strategies are often interlaced in discussions of language learning and are often applied to the same behavior. Further, even within the group of activities most often referred to as learning strategies, there is considerable confusion about definitions of specific strategies and about the hierarchic relationship among strategies (O'Malley et al,1985). In this line, Oxford (1990) argues that there is no complete agreement on exactly what strategies are; how many strategies exist; how they should be defined, demarcated, and categorized; and whether it is - or ever will be - possible to create a real, scientifically validated hierarchy of strategies, classification conflicts are inevitable. Below is the most convenient taxonomy which, in way or another, stands for the main types of LLSs.

### **1. Rubin's Taxonomy (1987)**

Rubins (1987) categorizes LLS used by learners into three types that contribute either directly or indirectly to language acquisition: language strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. The initial category of LLSs directly influences the development of the students' language structure.

Communication strategies, the second type, are less directly linked to language learning. They center on the act of engaging in conversations and understanding the interlocutor's message. Social strategies, the third type, involve activities that provide learners with opportunities to practice and enhance their language skills by interacting with others and gaining exposure to the language in real-life contexts (Wenden and Rubin. 1987).

## **2. O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) Taxonomy**

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) identified three main categories of language learning strategies:

- Cognitive strategies focus on actively manipulating information or tasks to enhance understanding, learning, or memory retention.
- Metacognitive strategies involve reflecting on the learning experience, planning learning activities, tracking progress, and assessing one's own understanding. For EFL students, self-regulation and self-evaluation are essential for monitoring growth and recognizing areas that need enhancement. Defining clear language learning objectives, evaluating language proficiency, and adapting strategies according to self-assessment are vital for successful language acquisition.
- Social-affective strategies comprise social interaction to support in learning and controlling personal emotions that may impede learning. Looking for feedback from teachers, peers, or language tutors, and engaging in authentic communication with native speakers or fellow learners can enhance language skills and deepen understanding of English language usage.

While this model was based on cognitive theory and praised, it faced criticism for the arbitrary nature of its third category.

## **3. Oxford's Taxonomy**

Rebecca Oxford introduces a taxonomy to categorize strategies into six groups: cognitive, mnemonic, metacognitive, compensatory, affective, and social.

- Cognitive strategies involve linking new and existing information.
- Mnemonic strategies involve using formulas or phrases for memory aid.
- Metacognitive strategies involve managing the learning process.
- Compensatory strategies involve using context to fill in gaps in understanding.
- Affective strategies involve regulating emotions and attitudes towards learning.
- Social strategies involve interacting with others to enhance language learning and cultural understanding.

Nevertheless, some critics later emphasized issues with this classification system, particularly in distinguishing between mnemonic and cognitive strategies, as mnemonic strategies are considered a subset of cognitive strategies. Additionally, the inclusion of compensatory strategies was questioned as they pertain more to how a learner uses language rather than how they learn it.

Overall, the classification of LLSs varies among researchers, leading to a lack of consensus on what constitutes a learning strategy in second language learning. Different taxonomies, such as Rubin's, O'Malley and Chamot's, and Oxford's beside others, categorize strategies based on different criteria, including cognitive, metacognitive, communication, and social/affective aspects. While these taxonomies provide valuable insights into

the types of strategies learners employ, conflicts and criticisms persist regarding the definitions and hierarchies of these strategies. In addition, as Cohen (1998) argues, the success of a strategy is not determined by the total number or variety of strategies used, or how often a specific strategy is implemented.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The present section focuses on the discussion and explanation of the method and procedures used by the researcher in the present study. It explains the interpretation and analysis of collected data in order to find out the types of LLSs used by EFL students at university level.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This research employed a quantitative method utilizing a questionnaire. The quantitative method involves the measurement of data during both collection and analysis phases. It uses an empirical strategy to link the main theory with the actual research (Bryman, 2012). The selected methodology primarily produced quantitative data. To classify LLSs utilized by students, a close-ended questionnaire was recommended. The questionnaire was given to the students, with answer sheet paper kept separate from the questionnaire itself. A Chi-square test was carried out to assess if there was a significant difference among the groups. As a fundamental classification framework, metacognitive, cognitive, and social categories were applied to identify LLSs used by students. This primary classification framework was utilized to create a LLS questionnaire. The aforementioned three categories were initially considered for data collection, as they were commonly found in language learning taxonomies from earlier studies.

#### **3.2 Population and Sample of the Study**

Since the purpose of the present study is to identify LLSs used by EFL students at university level, the population of this study was fourth class in the Department of English, College of Art, University of Mosul in 2023.

The study involved 40 fourth-year English students from the University of Mosul in Iraq, comprising 20 females and 20 males. The participants were aged between 22 and 24 during the data collection period. All participants had received at least four years of English instruction at the University of Mosul, College of Art by the time of this study.

#### **3.3 Description of Research Instrument**

Questionnaire is used to collect data. The type of the questionnaire is based on Setiyadi's (2016) taxonomy of LLSs with some modifications made by the researcher. See Appendix in the following link: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1t555tBitwLcoNIVVqURHTfRpzvossjdR?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1t555tBitwLcoNIVVqURHTfRpzvossjdR?usp=drive_link).

In each skill category, there are 20 items dedicated to speaking, listening, reading and writing. Within each group there are three sets of strategies; cognitive metacognitive and social strategies.

**In speaking** category item nos. 1-10 are grouped under cognitive strategies, item nos. 11-15 are grouped under metacognitive strategies and item nos. 16-20 under social strategies. **In listening** item nos. 1-11 are grouped under cognitive strategies, item nos. 12-17 are grouped under metacognitive strategies and item nos. 18-20 are under social strategies.

Cognitive strategies in **reading** are measured with item nos. 1-11. Metacognitive strategies are measured with item nos. 12-17, and social strategies with item nos. 18-20. **In writing** cognitive strategies are measured with item nos. 1-13. Metacognitive strategies are under item nos. 14-17 and social strategies with item nos. 18-20.

80 items are included in questionnaire form that assess the four skills. The participants are told to write their responses on a separate answer sheet. They have to point their level of agreement with each statement by selecting a number from 1 to 5. Number 1 means rarely or almost never true, 2 suggests it is mostly untrue, 3 indicates it is somewhat true, 4 implies it is usually true and finally 5 signifies that it is always or almost true.

#### 4. Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

The current study investigates LLSs utilized by EFL students in their four skills. The analysis indicates that the majority of the students regarding their learning style, showed a strong preference for metacognitive strategies to enhance the language proficiency. Moreover, the study found that although some students favored cognitive strategies to support their language acquisition, others preferred social strategies to develop their skills. See Table 1.

**Table 1. Overall comparisons for metacognitive, Cognitive, and social strategies**

Method	No.	%	Chi <sup>2</sup>
Metacognitive	66	41.77	5.41*
Cognitive	49	31.01	
Social	43	27.22	

\* refers to significant difference between groups at ( $P \leq 0.05$ ), according to *Chi*<sup>2</sup> test.

This table shows the distribution of different LLSs among the participants. The data in the table indicates that 66 participants (41.77%) favored using metacognitive strategies while 49 participants (31.01%) leaned towards cognitive strategies and 43 participants (27.22%) chose social strategies. A Chi square test was conducted to determine if there were any variances among these preferences. It was discovered that there was a distinction at a significance level at ( $P < 0.05$ ) when comparing the preference for strategies in favor of metacognitive strategies.

In the realm of listening skills, a predominant number of students were observed to rely on cognitive strategies. Social strategies followed closely behind in usage, while metacognitive strategies were noted to be utilized in the final stage. Regarding speaking skills, most students preferred metacognitive strategies, with cognitive strategies coming in second and social strategies used the least.

For writing skills, students generally began with metacognitive strategies, then employed cognitive strategies, and ended with social strategies. In contrast, a distinct pattern appeared in reading skills, where students primarily adopted social strategies, followed by cognitive strategies, with metacognitive strategies being the least utilized. See Table 2.

**Table 2. Difference between skills**

skills	metacognitive	cognitive	social	Chi-square
Speaking	25 (62.50%)	10 (25.00%)	5 (12.50)	16.26*
writing	22(55.00%)	10 (25.00%)	8(20.00%)	8.60*
listening	10 (25.00%)	18 (45.00%)	12(30.00%)	2,60 NS
Reading;	9 (22.50%)	11 (27.50%)	20 (50%)	5.15*

\* refers to significant difference between groups at ( $< 0.05$ ) according to Chi. test

\*NS refers to non-significant difference between methods.

Based on the data shown in table 2, the three strategies used across different language skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

Table 2 displays the distribution of metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies utilized for language skills such, as speaking, writing, listening and reading. To illustrate among participants focusing on speaking skills 25 individuals (62.50%) favored metacognitive strategies while 10 participants (25.00%) leaned towards strategies and 5 participants (12.50%) opted for social strategies. The Chi square test was employed to assess differences among the groups for each language skill. Noteworthy variances at  $P < 0.05$  were observed in speaking, writing and reading skills.

Based on the data provided in this study valuable insights are offered into the language learning strategies employed by EFL learners across speaking listening, reading and writing abilities. The results indicate an inclination towards strategies among students with variations noted in the utilization of cognitive and social strategies based on the specific language skill being practiced. Metacognitive approaches were predominantly favored in speaking and writing tasks as certain aspects of listening; meanwhile social strategies played a more substantial role, in reading activities. These distinctions emphasize the importance of tailored teaching methods that consider each students preferences and strengths.

By acknowledging and implementing these strategies, in language teaching teachers can create a learning atmosphere that is expected to improve language skills. The research advocates for a customized method, in language education urging those creating curricula and educators to develop language learning initiatives tailored to the strategies and requirements of individual students.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study on LLS in EFL students sheds light on the approaches students use to improve their language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing areas. The findings suggest a preference for metacognitive tactics, among learners; however, variations exist in the use of cognitive and social strategies depending on the specific language skill being targeted. The study emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and addressing variances in LLS among students.

By grasping and applying these techniques effectively teachers can enhance their instructional approaches to cater to students' requirements and choices more effectively which in turn results in better language learning results. Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of tailored language learning initiatives that take into account students' preferences and capabilities, in different situations. This thorough comprehension of LLSs can assist educators and instructional designers in creating meaningful and personalized language learning opportunities.

To sum it up nicely the results of this research, up the idea of taking a well-rounded and welcoming approach to language education—one that acknowledges and celebrates the various strategies used by learners. By nurturing this kind of setting teachers can establish a vibe that encourages students to reach higher levels of skill and triumph in their language learning adventure.

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