

Effects of English Language Proficiency on the Choice of Language Learning Strategies by Saudi English-major Undergraduates

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Abstract

It is reported that language learning is a creative and dynamic process and the learners are active partners in this process. This trend in language teaching motivated the researchers to investigate the learners' individual differences and the identification of language learning strategies (LLS) has become a major area of interest in this regard because it is suggested that language learners consciously or unconsciously employ different LLS. This research study investigated LLS used by Saudi English-major undergraduates by using SILL version 7. Paired Samples t-test was applied to see if significant differences exist as a result of their GPA differences. The informants of this study were 240 English-major undergraduates (low GPA, 106 & high GPA, 134) enrolled at foreign languages department Taif university. Results reported that the participants with high English language proficiency use language learning strategies more frequently. The participants ranked the metacognitive strategies the highest as compared to other LLS followed by social and cognitive LLS respectively. Among the remaining three categories of LLS, compensation and affective strategies showed mixed preferences but memory strategies were assigned the least mean values by both sample groups. Considering the fact that frequency of LLS usage and English language proficiency are positively linked to each other, it is concluded that it seems necessary to teach language learning strategies explicitly so that even the weaker students should be able to enhance English language proficiency by exploiting a wide range of suitable strategies that are appropriate to different classroom activities and learners' L2 experience.

Keywords: language learning strategies, English language proficiency, effect

1. Introduction

Though it is common to hear ESL/EFL teachers' complaints regarding the unsatisfactory performance of their students, yet the situation is rather alarming and a lot of research has reported that despite huge government spending, English language teaching in the Arab world in general and Saudi Arabia in particular have not achieved the desired goal of effective ELT (Zughoul, 1986; Sahu, 1999; Rababah, 2003; Al-Jarf, 2008). AlFadly (2003) stated that Arab students remain unable to achieve the desired proficiency in English even after studying the target language for many years. Several studies have been conducted to identify the causes of Arab students' low proficiency level in the target level (Tushyeh, 1992; Rababah, 2003; Reymond, 2008; Javid, Farooq & Ajmal, 2012) but there seems a paucity of research to identify the reasons of this low English language proficiency caused by the learner-related factors. A host of studies suggested that efficient language learners, who study English as a second or foreign language, employ a variety of strategies to facilitate their learning (O, Malley, 1987; Cohen, 1998; McDonough, 1995). Oxford & Nyikos (1989) reported that appropriate language learning strategies (LLS) used by the learners help them achieve higher proficiency in the target language as well as assist them to become self-sufficient learners who possess the abilities such as learner autonomy, self-sufficiency and self-direction: necessary qualities of life-long learners (Nunan, 1988; Corder, 1981). Use of language learning strategies by language learners has been extensively investigated in ESL context but there seems a paucity of LLS research in the EFL context of the Arab world (Radwan, 2010). This scarcity of research is reported in the Arab world in general (El-Dib, 2004; Khalil, 2005; Shmais, 2003; Radwan, 2010) and Saudi Arabia in specific (e.g., Otaibi, 2004). This study is an effort to fill this gap by investigating English-major university undergraduates in a public university of Saudi Arabia.

2. Literature Review

It has been reported that the trend of investigating LLS in learning English as a second/foreign language proliferated during the last three decades when Rubin (1975) enunciated his theory of successful language learners (Jurković, 2010). Motallebzadeh & Mamdoohi (2011, p. 5) stated that successful language learners apply more appropriate and suitable LLS as compared to less successful language learners and said that "...better language learners generally use strategies appropriate to their own stage of learning, personality, age, purpose for learning the language and type of language". Along with several other issues related to learners' ability, personality and skills, the role of LLS in acquiring English as a second language (e.g., Rubin, 1975; Bialystok, 1981; Mansanares & Russo, 1985; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Gregerson, 2000; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Wharton, 2000; Griffiths & Parr, 2001; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Dornyei, 2005) and a foreign language (e.g., Diab, 2000; Abu Shmais, 2003; Al-Otaibi, 2004; Khalil, 2005; Salem, 2006; Riazi, 2007; Eslami & Al-Buainain, 2009; Radwan, 2010; Al-Buainain, 2010) has been extensively investigated. The significance of LLS is evident from the fact that numerous definitions are found in the literature.

The word 'strategy' is derived from the ancient Greek word 'strategia' meaning the actions or measures taken to win a war (Wikipedia, 2009). Among the earliest definitions, Rigney (1978) identified LLS as a set of actions utilised by the learners to acquire, retrieve, perform or retain something. O'Malley & Chamot (1990) reported that successful language learners use LLS as tools for active, self-directed involvement to develop the target language communicative ability. Supporting the role of LLS in achieving the much-after goal of self-sufficiency, Holec (1981) reiterated that LLS are instrumental in developing learners' autonomy. LLS have been defined as "...the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal" (Chamot, 2004, p. 14) and "... specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). The above-mentioned definitions among a multitude of others suggest that LLS are different from other language learning processes and techniques because LLS are based on the learners' recognition of their specific language needs (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Eslami, Al-Buainain & Tzou, 2009). Research has suggested that successful learners develop some sort of meta-awareness of their LLS with the passage of time that help them to critically analyse the language tasks they want to accomplish and choose the most suitable and appropriate LLS to complete the task successfully (Littlejohn, 2008). Much research indicated that language learners consciously or unconsciously employ different LLS (Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Wharton, 2000). Talking about the main objectives of LLS research, Chamot (2001, pp. 25-26) suggested that:

...two major goals in language learning strategy research are to (1) identify and compare the learning strategies used by more and less successful language learners, and (2) provide instruction to less successful learners that helps them become more successful in their language study.

In an attempt to trace the historical background that initiated LLS-related research, O'Malley & Chamot, (1995) reported that ELT has witnessed a revolution in the late 60's and early 70's with a shift from the teacher-centered pedagogy to teaching practices that had greater emphasis on learners and learning. The language teachers' learner-centered pedagogy helps the students to become autonomous and independent learners who have the ability to continue their language learning process even in the absence of formal classroom teaching. This pedagogical shift in language teaching developed the learners' active cognitive process with LLS as its most integral component (Littlewood, 1999). This cognitive view of language learning considers that learning is creative process and the learners who actively use appropriate strategies are more successful as compared to the ones who do not do that (Corder, 1981). Khalil (2005) stated that till the end of 1960s, the emphasis of ESL/EFL research has been on investigating teaching methodologies and teaching materials but the focus shifted to the evaluation of the learner-related factors, such as, learners' motivation, attitudes, learning styles, LLS etc. Research has offered valuable insights into the fact that these factors have strong correlation with success in language learning and numerous research studies have tried to identify LLS that successful language learners use to ensure effective learning (See for example, Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Naiman, Frohlich, Stern & Todesco, 1978; Mansanares & Russo, 1985; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Dornyei, 1990; Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Cohen, 1992; Peng, 2001; Chamot, 2004; Eslami & Al-Buainain, 2009; Radwan, 2010). The findings of the above-mentioned studies seem to suggest that if appropriate LLS are taught to the less successful language learners, they will be able to take care of their language learning independently and effectively by employing suitable LLS. Several classifications of LLS have been suggested, such as O'Malley & Chamot's (1990) division of LLS into three main categories: cognitive, metacognitive, and social-affective and Oxford's (1990) classification of LLS into the following six broad categories: memory, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective, and social.

Numerous empirical studies have been conducted in different ESL/EFL contexts to investigate the attitudes of successful language learners towards LLS so that these strategies may be taught to the less successful ones to enable them to become more effective language learners (Green and Oxford, 1995; Park, 1997; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Wharton, 2000; Griffiths and Parr, 2001). LLS research ranged from simply identifying learners' preferred language strategies (Rubin, 1987; Stern, 1975) to the later trend of identifying the LLS in relation to various language learning variables: English language proficiency, gender, cultural background, motivation etc. (El-Dib, 2004; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Khalil, 2005; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Nisbet, Tindell & Arroyo, 2005; Shmais, 2003). Several studies reported a strong positive link between learners' target language proficiency and the use of appropriate LLS (Shmais, 2003; Khalil, 2005). Various research studies utilised different aspects of language proficiency to investigate their role in applying LLS. These English language proficiency variables included learners' duration of study (Khalil, 2005), learners' self-rating in language proficiency (Oxford & Nvikos, 1989), learners' scores in TOEFL (Nisbet Tindall & Arroyo, 2005), learners' GPAs in English language courses (Shmais, 2003), teachers' judgments about their students (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007) etc. Lan & Oxford (2003) investigated the EFL context of Taiwanese elementary school learners and found that the students with higher English language proficiency use cognitive, compensatory, affective and metacognitive strategies more effectively as compared to the less proficient learners. Bruen's (2001) study attempted to find out the use of language learning strategies by a group of Irish students who were learning German as a second language and reported a positive correlation of German proficiency with the use of strategies.

3. Research Objectives/Questions

This study is directed by the following research questions:

- a. What are the most frequent language learning strategies used by Saudi English-major students enrolled at Foreign Language Department, Taif University?
- b. Are there any statistically significant differences as a result of their GPA differences?
- c. What strategies are correlated with learners' high GPA?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Participants

English-major university undergraduates studying at the Foreign Languages Department, Taif University (FLDTU) were the participants of this empirical study. These students join Taif University after completing 12 years of formal education at different schools and study English as a compulsory subject since their 6th grade. After joining FLDTU, they are taught English language courses related to different sub-disciplines, i.e., four language skills, grammar, linguistics, literature and translation.

4.2 Instrumentation

To generate the data concerning the responses of the participants of the study regarding their LLS use, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL: version 7.0) questionnaire designed by (Oxford, 1990) was administered to English-major university undergraduates studying at FLDTU. SILL is an instrument that has been widely used world-wide to record the frequency of LLS employed by the learners. This questionnaire has 50 items included in 6 subcategories of LLS as shown in the following table:

Table 1. LLS items distribution according to 6 types

No	LLS strategy	Items	Total
1	Memory	1-9	9
2	Cognitive	10-23	14
3	Compensation	24-29	6
4	Metacognitive	30-38	9
5	Affective	39-44	6
6	Social	45-50	6

Cronbach alpha coefficient for internal consistency for SILL (Oxford, 1990/Version 7) questionnaire was 0.86. Oxford (1996, p. 29) stated that reliability "is determined with the whole instrument because the six categories are strongly correlated with the SILL mean (0.66–0.81) and moderately correlated with each other (0.35–0.61)".

The Arabic version of the questionnaire was administered to the English-major male and female students (freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors). The researchers distributed 35 questionnaires to each of the eight groups mentioned above. Incomplete questionnaires, questionnaires with no GPA mentioned, or questionnaire with same responses (i.e., all strongly agree --- strongly disagree are ticked) were rejected. The remaining 240 questionnaire were divided into two groups: participants with high GPA and the ones with low GPA. One hundred and six questionnaires were identified as the ones filled in by the participants with low GPA and 134 questionnaires were with high GPA.

4.3 Data Analysis

Arabic Translation of SILL questionnaire (See Appendix # 2) was administered to all English-major university undergraduates studying at FLDTU during the second semester of the academic year 2011/2012. The responses of the participants were manually coded and analysed by using SPSS version 10. The descriptive statistics i.e., the *means*, *medians*, *standard deviations* and *percentages* of the samples' responses regarding the frequency of LLS used by Saudi English-major university undergraduates were calculated. Independent Samples T-Test was applied to identify any statistically significant differences as a result of the students' GPA differences.

5. Results

The results of Independent-Samples T-test are presented in the tables below. For the purpose of the description of the results, the following criteria were followed: mean value of 3.6 or above is considered high ranking, 2.99 or below is considered low ranking where as the values between these two (i.e., 3 – 3.59) are considered medium ranking.

Table 2. Results of LLS strategies (Memory)

The questionnaire items	Group	n	M	SD	T	Df	p value
1 Item 1	Low GPA	106	3.3962	1.0390	-1.083	238	.280
	High GPA	134	3.5522	1.1605	-1.097	234.33	.274
2 Item 2	Low GPA	106	2.8113	1.1137	-2.054	237	.041
	High GPA	133	3.5789	3.7157	-2.259	160.86	.025
3 Item 3	Low GPA	106	3.5472	1.0248	.318	238	.751
	High GPA	134	3.5000	1.2247	.325	237.22	.746
4 Item 4	Low GPA	106	2.9245	1.3501	-.951	238	.343
	High GPA	134	3.0896	1.3234	-.949	223.38	.344
5 Item 5	Low GPA	106	2.1509	1.1856	-.088	238	.930
	High GPA	134	2.1642	1.1252	-.088	219.83	.930
6 Item 6	Low GPA	106	2.0566	1.1283	-.118	238	.906
	High GPA	134	2.0746	1.2054	-.119	231.32	.905
7 Item 7	Low GPA	106	2.7453	1.1132	-1.402	238	.162
	High GPA	134	2.9552	1.1817	-1.412	230.82	.159
8 Item 8	Low GPA	106	2.9906	.9309	.041	238	.968
	High GPA	134	2.9851	1.1171	.042	237.33	.967
9 Item 9	Low GPA	106	3.5755	1.2417	.288	238	.774
	High GPA	134	3.5299	1.1996	.287	221.81	.774

Results of the items meant to elicit participants' LLS strategies related to memory have been described in the table above. The participants with high GPA assigned higher mean values to the majority of the items except the 3rd and 8th questionnaire items that indicated that comparatively higher mean values were allocated by the participants with low GPA for these two items. Another interesting result is that no item has been assigned high ranking whereas four items (5, 6, 7 & 8) were assigned low mean values by both groups. Items 2 and 4 reported low mean by the low GPA group. All the other items fell in the medium category because of the medium ranking values. The data analysis indicated that there did not exist any significant differences in the responses of both the groups except for the item 2 as reported by Independent-Samples T-test results: high GPA group's value was 3.57 as compared to low GPA group's mean value of only 2.81 indicating that these students don't use their

audio-visual capacities to memorise and retain English lexical items.

Table 2 presents the results generated through the data analysis of the items that elicited participants' responses related to their cognitive LLS strategies usage.

Table 3. Results of LLS strategies (cognitive)

The questionnaire items		Group	n	M	SD	T	df	p value
10	Item 10	Low GPA	106	3.5283	1.2127	-.109	238	.913
		High GPA	134	3.5448	1.1213	-.108	216.77	.914
11	Item 11	Low GPA	106	3.5566	1.3528	-2.515	238	.013
		High GPA	134	3.9478	1.0571	-2.444	195.01	.015
12	Item 12	Low GPA	106	3.2170	1.1711	-2.164	238	.031
		High GPA	134	3.5448	1.1609	-2.162	224.55	.032
13	Item 13	Low GPA	106	3.3585	1.0884	-.873	238	.383
		High GPA	134	3.4851	1.1355	-.878	229.39	.381
14	Item 14	Low GPA	106	3.1604	1.2121	-1.777	238	.077
		High GPA	134	3.4328	1.1533	-1.767	220.11	.079
15	Item 15	Low GPA	106	3.5849	1.3998	-1.008	237	.314
		High GPA	133	3.7669	1.3756	-1.006	223.51	.315
16	Item 16	Low GPA	106	3.2075	1.2009	-.740	238	.460
		High GPA	134	3.3284	1.2965	-.747	232.10	.456
17	Item 17	Low GPA	106	2.7453	1.3170	-3.350	238	.001
		High GPA	134	3.2910	1.2004	-3.314	215.03	.001
18	Item 18	Low GPA	106	3.2642	1.2895	-2.208	238	.028
		High GPA	134	3.6269	1.2426	-2.199	221.53	.029
19	Item 19	Low GPA	106	3.2642	1.1322	.265	238	.791
		High GPA	134	3.2239	1.1993	.267	230.65	.790
20	Item 20	Low GPA	106	2.8396	1.0613	-.565	238	.573
		High GPA	134	2.9179	1.0694	-.566	226.19	.572
21	Item 21	Low GPA	105	3.4857	1.1612	-.657	237	.512
		High GPA	134	3.5896	1.2518	-.663	230.31	.508
22	Item 22	Low GPA	106	2.9151	1.1962	-1.647	238	.101
		High GPA	134	3.1791	1.2616	-1.657	230.30	.099
23	Item 23	Low GPA	106	3.2264	1.2366	-1.008	238	.315
		High GPA	134	3.3881	1.2318	-1.007	225.06	.315

This is the biggest component of this questionnaire with a total number of items reaching 14. Results clearly indicate that the majority of the items were assigned mean values of medium range by both the sample groups. There are only three items (11, 15, & 18) of this questionnaire category that have been allotted high values and that was only by the sample group with high GPA whereas the values allocated by low GPA group fell in the category of medium range for these items. "I try to find patterns in English" is the only item that has been assigned low mean value by both the groups and items 15 and 22 were the others which were dealt with similarly by low GPA group. All the other questionnaire items followed the trend that has been exhibited in the previous category that overall higher values were assigned by high GPA group except item 19 that reported opposite trend suggesting that weaker students with low GPA depend on the mother tongue alternative for new English words they want to learn. Results indicate that four items (11, 12, 17 & 18) exhibited statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in the responses of the sample groups in favour of high GPA participants who gave out higher mean values in this regard.

Table 3. Results of LLS strategies (compensation)

The questionnaire items		Group	N	M	SD	T	df	p value
24	Item 24	Low GPA	106	3.4245	1.1788	-2.337	238	.020
		High GPA	134	3.7612	1.0490	-2.306	212.064	.022
25	Item 25	Low GPA	106	3.2358	1.1592	-1.142	238	.254
		High GPA	134	3.4179	1.2761	-1.155	233.442	.249
26	Item 26	Low GPA	106	2.9057	1.3699	-.316	238	.753
		High GPA	134	2.9627	1.4057	-.317	227.923	.752
27	Item 27	Low GPA	106	2.5189	1.1232	-.376	238	.707
		High GPA	134	2.5746	1.1528	-.377	227.946	.706
28	Item 28	Low GPA	106	3.5849	1.1700	.117	238	.907
		High GPA	134	3.5672	1.1662	.117	225.124	.907
29	Item 29	Low GPA	106	3.6981	1.2202	-1.485	238	.139
		High GPA	134	3.9179	1.0694	-1.463	210.115	.145

Table 3 details the data analysis of the compensation LLS strategies and the participants report medium to high ranking for the majority of the items except items 26 and 27 with low mean values of less than 3 (low GPA, 2.90: high GPA, 2.96 & low GPA, 2.51: high GPA, 2.57 respectively). The results suggest that Saudi English-major undergraduates do not try to make up new words and do not prefer to read English without looking up new words. This habit seems the main reason behind slow reading speed of the students supporting the findings of Javid & Khairi (2011) who reported that Saudi undergraduates suffer from severe handicap in reading skills. Both sample groups reported strong liking for item 29 by assigning high ranking to it. Item 24 was also assigned higher value by high GPA group indicating that they try to guess the meaning of the unknown words they encounter in their readings. Significant difference has been reported for this item that informs that low GPA group does not use this reading technique. There is only one item in which low GPA group assigned higher mean value as compared to the other group.

Table 4. Results of LLS strategies (Metacognitive)

The questionnaire items		Group	n	M	SD	T	df	p value
30	Item 30	Low GPA	106	3.4434	1.1959	-2.140	238	.033
		High GPA	134	3.7612	1.0980	-2.119	215.932	.035
31	Item 31	Low GPA	106	3.4906	1.2051	-.874	238	.383
		High GPA	134	3.6194	1.0746	-.862	212.317	.389
32	Item 32	Low GPA	106	3.9811	1.1211	-1.302	238	.194
		High GPA	134	4.1642	1.0491	-1.292	218.201	.198
33	Item 33	Low GPA	106	3.9906	1.1670	-.878	238	.381
		High GPA	134	4.1194	1.0971	-.872	218.739	.384
34	Item 34	Low GPA	106	3.0943	1.2538	-1.207	238	.229
		High GPA	134	3.2836	1.1673	-1.197	217.594	.233
35	Item 35	Low GPA	106	3.3208	1.2386	-2.365	238	.019
		High GPA	134	3.7015	1.2387	-2.365	225.450	.019
36	Item 36	Low GPA	106	3.3679	1.1656	-1.177	238	.240
		High GPA	134	3.5448	1.1478	-1.175	223.877	.241
37	Item 37	Low GPA	106	3.1132	1.2292	-1.924	238	.056
		High GPA	134	3.4179	1.2096	-1.920	223.803	.056
38	Item 38	Low GPA	106	3.8774	1.1929	-1.964	238	.051
		High GPA	134	4.1567	1.0101	-1.926	205.665	.055

Participants' responses for metacognitive LLS strategies have been elicited by the nine items mentioned in table 4 and the results revealed that the participants showed strong liking for this strategies. Six items of this category have been assigned high mean values either by both the groups or at least by the high GPA sample group. Highest mean values of more than 4 have been allocated to items 32, 33 and 38 (4.16, 4.11, & 4.15 respectively). No item of this category reported low preference by either of the group. Significant difference was reported for the items which elicited participants' responses towards finding out the ways and opportunities to practice English and look for people they can talk to in English showing their strong desire to be proficient in English language.

Table 5. Results of LLS strategies (Affective)

The questionnaire items	Group	N	M	SD	T	df	p value
39 Item 39	Low GPA	106	3.3302	1.2089	.606	238	.545
	High GPA	134	3.2313	1.2915	.610	231.32	.542
40 Item 40	Low GPA	106	3.4340	1.1631	-2.972	238	.003
	High GPA	134	3.8806	1.1506	-2.968	224.35	.003
41 Item 41	Low GPA	106	3.3208	1.2539	-.132	238	.895
	High GPA	134	3.3433	1.3495	-.134	231.87	.894
42 Item 42	Low GPA	106	3.1226	1.3071	-1.071	238	.285
	High GPA	134	3.2985	1.2265	-1.064	218.50	.289
43 Item 43	Low GPA	106	2.2170	1.2649	-.852	238	.395
	High GPA	134	2.3657	1.4011	-.862	233.82	.389
44 Item 44	Low GPA	106	3.2453	1.3224	.300	238	.764
	High GPA	134	3.1940	1.3063	.300	224.19	.765

The results of affective LLS strategies have also been found in line with metacognitive strategies because all the items except the second last one have been allotted low ranking. Two items (39 & 44) exhibited different trend and the values assigned by the low GPA group were higher than the ones ranked by the high GPA group. "I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making mistakes" is the only item which showed significant difference in the responses of the groups strongly indicating that inhibition is a significant factor that provides a strong handicap to achieve proficiency in the target language.

Table 6. Results of LLS strategies (Social)

The questionnaire items	Group	N	M	SD	T	df	p value
45 Item 45	Low GPA	106	3.5660	1.2575	-.336	238	.737
	High GPA	134	3.6194	1.1939	-.334	219.874	.739
46 Item 46	Low GPA	106	3.2925	1.4407	-2.153	238	.032
	High GPA	134	3.6642	1.2321	-2.114	206.951	.036
47 Item 47	Low GPA	106	2.7547	1.2559	-2.369	238	.019
	High GPA	134	3.1493	1.3007	-2.379	228.756	.018
48 Item 48	Low GPA	106	3.3019	1.2886	-2.129	238	.034
	High GPA	134	3.6493	1.2279	-2.117	220.286	.035
49 Item 49	Low GPA	106	3.4151	1.2863	-1.542	238	.124
	High GPA	134	3.6642	1.2074	-1.530	218.552	.127
50 Item 50	Low GPA	106	3.4340	1.3453	-2.996	238	.003
	High GPA	134	3.9328	1.2275	-2.965	215.164	.003

The same trend of high preference as noticed in the previous two tables is quite evident in the results of social LLS strategies and high GPA group assigned high mean values to all the items of this category except item 47 (low GPA: 2.75 & high GPA: 3.14). This item reveals the psychological underpinnings of Saudi students that

they do not prefer to use target language with their class fellows supporting the findings of Javid (2011) who reported that Saudi medical undergraduate do not like to let their weaknesses known to their peers. Independent Samples T-test results revealed significant differences in four items of this category (46, 47, 48 & 50) strongly suggesting that those students who overcome their social inhibitions and let the others correct their mistakes perform better and achieve English language proficiency quickly as compared to their shy counterparts in this regard.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The descriptive analysis of the various LLS categories has revealed that the participants of this study who have high GPA assigned higher values to nearly all the 50 SILL items except few exceptions (memory, 3 & 8; cognitive, 9; compensation, 28; metacognitive, none; affective, 39 & 44; social, none) where low GPA group allocated higher values for these items as compared to the ones assigned by high GPA group but interesting fact is that no item has shown significant difference in their response. This result is in accord with the findings of the previous research conducted in the various countries and quite consistently reported a positive link between the use of language learning strategies and their proficiency in English (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Khalil, 2005; Shmais, 2003; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Park, 1997). The study conducted by Radwan (2010) also revealed that more proficient Omani students use language learning strategies more frequently as compared to the less proficient ones. Although majority of the studies support the positive connection between LLS frequency and the target language proficiency, yet certain contradictory findings have also been reported. Shamais (2003) stated that high GPA students' frequency of LLS use was limited to only metacognitive strategies as compared to the low GPA students. The same trend has been reported by Nisbet, Tindel & Arroyo (2005) who found out a difference of only 4% variation in TOEFL scores and frequency of LLS use in only one category, i.e., metacognitive LLS. The results offer significant insights into the fact that it is the awareness of the language needs that force and motivate the more proficient students to use LLS that are instrumental in acquiring the target language through analysing, planning, practicing, reasoning and evaluating their learning. It has also been suggested that "these learners exercise a great deal of control over their emotions and attitudes through lowering their anxiety levels and increasing their motivation levels" (Radwan, 2010, p. 140).

Saudi English-major undergraduates represented by the participants of this study ranked the metacognitive strategies the highest as compared to other LLS strategies followed by social and cognitive LLS strategies respectively. The finding is in line with Radwan (2010) who reported that Omani students favoured metacognitive LLS strategies to all other components of SILL inventory. The same has been revealed by Al-Buainain (2010) and Riaz (2007) who stated that the participants of their studies showed their preference for metacognitive strategies followed by cognitive strategies. The preference of metacognitive strategies has also been reported in several other studies conducted in the various parts of the world (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Nisbet, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005). Another interesting finding is that the participants with high GPA assigned highest mean value of more than 4.0 to 3 metacognitive strategies (I pay attention when someone is speaking English, 4.16; I think about my progress in learning English, 4.15; I try to find out how to be a better learner of English, 4.11) whereas no other item of any other category has been assigned the highest value of 4.0 or above. Furthermore, this is the only LLS category in which no item was assigned low value by either of the groups. The results of independent-samples t-test revealed that there was only one item which was allocated low mean value (I practice English with other students: low GPA, 2.75 & high GPA, 3.14) and all the other items were allotted high ranking by the high GPA group and medium ranking by low GPA group. Out of the total 6 items in this category, 4 items were reported to have significant difference in the perception of the groups. As far the cognitive strategies are concerned, there was only one item which was assigned low value by both groups (I try to find patterns in English: low GPA, 2.83 & high GPA, 2.91) and two items that reported low ranking by low GPA group (I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English: low GPA, 2.74 & high GPA, 3.29 - I try not to translate word-for-word: low GPA, 2.91 & high GPA, 3.17). This finding seems to suggest that low proficiency students try to avoid writing skills and have higher tendency of word for word translation using their mother tongue. All other items of this category were assigned either high or medium values by both the groups.

Among the remaining three categories of LLS strategies, compensation and affective strategies showed mixed preferences but memory LLS strategies were assigned the least mean values by both sample groups confirming the findings of research conducted in the Arab world (Al-Buainain, 2010; Radwan, 2010; Khalil, 2005; Al-Otaibi, 2004 etc.) and elsewhere (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Rong, 1999; Goh & Foong, 1997 etc.). This result supported the findings of (Al-Buainain, 2010) who reported that the least favoured LLS strategies as perceived by the participants of his study remained memory strategies and affective strategies respectively. Assigning

memory LLS strategies the least mean values seems quite interesting rather surprising finding considering the fact that Arabs are reported to have a strong memory. In addition to that, it has also been reported that educational system in most of the Arab countries requires the students to rely on rote memorisation. Radwan (2010, p. 138) has offered a probable reason behind this apparently surprising finding by stating that it may be due to “students’ displeasure with the conservative educational methods and techniques....the students’ recognition that excelling in learning a foreign language requires actively involving themselves in the learning process, seeking opportunities to use the language, cooperating with their peers, etc”.

As reported by much research, the participants with high GPA have overall positive attitude towards LLS as indicated by their assigned higher ranking to the vast majority of SILL inventory as compared to their low GPA counterparts offering valuable insights that frequency of LLS usage and English language proficiency are positively linked to each other. Considering this finding, it is concluded that it seems necessary to teach language learning strategies explicitly so that even the weaker students should be able to enhance English language proficiency by exploiting a wide range of suitable strategies “appropriate to different instructional task and activities that constitute an essential part of the classroom L2 experience” (Khalil, 2005, p. 115). Furthermore, it can be inferred that it is rather important for weaker students that the teachers should teach them explicit strategy usage as it is emphasised that “explicitly describing, discussing, and reinforcing strategies in the classroom can have a direct payoff on student outcomes” (Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1995, p. 29).

This empirical study investigated Saudi English-major university undergraduates’ LLS usage in respect to one important variable, i.e., participants’ English proficiency judged by their GPA. There seems an urgent need to investigate the effect of other relevant variables such as gender, number of years of study, university major, motivational orientations etc. on LLS use to enrich this important area that has significant pedagogical implications for EFL teaching/learning.

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Appendix 1

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

Oxford (1990)

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 separate worksheet, write the response

(1, 2, 3, 4, 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

Part A

1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.
7. I physically act out new English words.
8. I review English lessons often.
9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.

Part B

10. I say or write new English words several times.
11. I try to talk like native English speakers.
12. I practice the sounds of English.
13. I use the English words I know in different ways.
14. I start conversations in English.
15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.
16. I read for pleasure in English.
17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.

18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.
19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.
20. I try to find patterns in English.
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.
22. I try not to translate word-for-word.
23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.

Part C

24. To understand unfamiliar words, I make guesses.
25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
26. I make up new words if I don't know the right ones in English.
27. I read English without looking up every new word.
28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.
29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

Part D

30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.
31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.
32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.
34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
35. I look for people I can talk to in English.
36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.
38. I think about my progress in learning English.

Part E

39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making mistakes.
41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.
44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.

Part F

45. If I don't understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.
47. I practice English with other students.
48. I ask for help from English speakers.
49. I ask questions in English.
50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.