LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES USED IN EFL CLASSES AND ROLE OF GENDER IN HIGH SCHOOL CONTEXT[1]

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Abstract

The current research aimed to reveal the language learning strategies (LLS) used by Anatolian high school students and examine whether gender has a role in their strategy preferences and frequency of using them.

One hundred fifty-six participants were randomly selected as the participants (100 females and 56 males). The participants learning English as a foreign language were chosen randomly from different grades of Siirt Atatürk Anatolian High School (9th, 10th and 11th).

The study data were collected through the questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990) to discover the language learning strategies used in the language learning continuum. Descriptive statistics were computed to determine the language strategies used in a high school context and discover if gender has a role in adapting the strategies.

In light of the current research findings, the researcher found out that the female learners used language learning strategies more frequently than the male participants. While the most favoured strategies were social language learning strategies, and the effective strategies were the least preferred.

Keywords: *Language Learning strategies, High School, Gender.*

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LİSE BAĞLAMINDA İNGİLİZCENİN YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRETİLDİĞİ DERSLERDE KULLANILAN DİL ÖĞRENME STRATEJİLERİ VE CİNSİYETİN ROLÜ

Öz

Mevcut araştırma, lise öğrencilerinin kullandıkları dil öğrenme stratejilerini ortaya çıkarmayı, strateji tercihlerinde ve bunları kullanma sıklığında cinsiyetin rolü olup olmadığını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Katılımcı olarak yüz elli altı katılımcı rastgele seçilmiştir (100 kız ve 56 erkek). Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrenciler Siirt Atatürk Anadolu Lisesinin 9, 10 ve 11. sınıf seviyelerinden rastgele seçildi.

Çalışmanın verileri, dil öğrenme sürecinde kullanılan dil öğrenme stratejilerini ortaya çıkarmak için Oxford (1990) tarafından geliştirilen SILL adlı ölçek aracılığıyla toplandı. Lisede kullanılan dil stratejilerini belirlemek ve bu stratejileri kullanmada cinsiyetin bir rolü olup olmadığını keşfetmek için tanımlayıcı istatistiklerden faydalanıldı.

Araştırmacı, mevcut araştırmanın bulguları ışığında, kız öğrencilerin erkek katılımcılara göre dil öğrenme stratejilerini daha sık kullandıklarını ortaya çıkarmıştır. En çok tercih edilen stratejiler sosyal dil öğrenme stratejileridir. Duygusal dil öğrenme stratejileri ise kullanımı en az tercih edilen stratejilerdi.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Dil Öğrenme stratejileri, Lise, Cinsiyet.*

Introduction

The difference between students' performances from the same class, backgrounds, and ages has shifted the attraction of many scholars to the individual differences in teaching English as a foreign and second language. The current study aims to reveal language learning strategies used by Anatolian high school students and discover whether gender is a determinant factor while applying the strategies in the language learning continuum. Dörnyei (2005) declared that personal differences are from the chief elements of L2 (second language) achievement. Thus this study aims to shed light on one of these individual differences and discover the role of gender in language learning preferences and frequency.

The word strategy is derived from the Greek word strategia, which means the art of war or leadership. Many scholars tried to define Language Learning Strategies (LLS). Oxford (1990), the most permanent one, is one of the most

prominent scholars searching this phenomenon. She defines them as the steps which help language learners to make the learning process more convenient, more accessible, more motivated and more competent.

Some researchers discovered a positive correlation between achievement and LLS use. Thompson & Rubin (1994) discovered in their study that good language learners use LLS more frequently than those who are not efficient language learners.

Number of the participants, the context of the study are the main restrictions of the current study. The study results will not give information about the other school types and the other age groups since the participants are all Anatolian high school students and their age range is between 14 and 18.

1. Literature Review

The distinctions between the students' performances lead the prominent scholars to reveal the mental processes behind it. One of the findings of studies was that more LLS were applied by the good learners while learning a foreign language (Thompson & Rubin, 1994). Different classifications have been used in order to define the strategies, and the most significant of these studies are:

1.1. Classification of Language Learning Strategies

1.1.1. Cohen's Classification (1988)

According to Cohen (1988, p.9), LLS are the mental processes that support language learning via drawing new schemas or relating the newly learned linguistic items to the existing ones and retrieving them when necessary. In Cohen's categorisation, LLS consist of four strategies:

1. Retrieval Strategies: By creating mental ties, these strategies help the learners to remember and use the necessary vocabulary.

2. Cover Strategies: By relieving the learners emotionally, they help them to foster their beliefs about their self-efficacy and believe that they have control over the language learnt.

3. Rehearsal Strategies: By practising and using the structures in the target language, the learners master it.

4. Communication Strategies: By adapting and practising the new vocabulary, language learners can efficiently communicate in the target language.

1.1.2. Oxford's Classification

Oxford's categorisation is the most detailed and widely used by scholars and researchers studying language learning and teaching (Ellis, 1994, p.539). In the detailed model, there are two categories with six sub-sets. The direct strategies are used to learn the target language; on the other hand, the indirect strategies support the learners to organise the linguistic items they have learned.

Direct Strategies:

- Memory strategies are used to produce mental linkages, make use of images and sounds, retrieve well, and employ actions such as changing the order of the letters in a word.

- Cognitive strategies are applied for practising, getting and sending messages, reasoning and analysing, originating structure for the new output and input, such as note-taking.

- Compensation strategies are used for making comprehensible guesses while reading and listening and removing the restrictions in productive skills by using body language.

Indirect strategies:

- Social strategies are used for collaborating and empathising with others and inquiring.

- Affective strategies are applied by the learners for decreasing their anxiety, hearting themselves and taking their affective fever using byways as sharing emotions and using a checklist.

- Language learners use metacognitive strategies to focus, organise, arrange, and assess their language learning experience.

1.2. Use Language Learning Strategies and Gender

Many researchers have found that gender has a significant role in the frequency of the LLS used by the students in language classrooms. Chang (2011) has asserted that since males and females are different biologically and are raised differently because of the different roles in their societies, it is not surprising that they benefit from different strategies.

However, the findings of the studies conducted to reveal the use of LLS and their frequencies regarding gender differences are contradictory. Some

researchers have found that female language learners use more strategies and benefit from them more frequently (Yunus, Sulaiman, & Embi, 2013). On the other hand, some researchers discovered that male learners are superior to female users in frequency and diversity of the LLS in their language learning continuum. Liyanage and Bartlett (2012) found out that females used cognitive and metacognitive strategies more than male participants. According to the study conducted by Yılmaz (2010), there was a significant difference in the use of effective strategies, and females were superior to males.

2. Research Questions

The research questions of the current study are:

1. What are the strategy preferences of High School Students in Siirt?

2. Is gender a determinant factor while implementing language learning strategies and the frequency of using them?

3. Conceptual Framework and the Expected Outcomes

In the majority of the studies both conducted in Turkey and abroad, such as Bekleyen (2006), Gerami and Baighlou (2011), Grossman (2011), Hamamcı (2012), İzci and Sucu (2011) have discovered that the language learners use metacognitive strategies more frequently and the affective strategies less. The literature findings are linear with ones that the researcher has expected to find based on his expectations shaped in his career. The researcher observed that his students were not good at controlling their emotions, especially in the speaking classes. So it is not surprising to see the affective strategies at the bottom of the strategy preference list. However, the researcher did not expect the metacognitive strategies to be at the top of the list for.

4. Methodology

4.1. The Research Design

Campbell (1984) favours quantitative methods since he believes that they are more suitable for collecting data impartially by applying: surveys, quasi-experimental designs, and questionnaires. Campbell has stated that the researchers ought not to be the defender of any side. The researcher's task is to conduct a study and reveal the study results to enlighten society about a phenomenon. The findings of the quantitative studies do not contain any judgement of the researcher. For that reason, the researcher used quantitative research methodology and conducted it, and since the relation between two phenomena was examined, the researcher used

a correlational research design. The study was carried out at Siirt Atatürk Anatolian High School to see the learners' language learning strategy preferences and whether gender is a determinant factor in their preferences and frequencies.

4.2. Participants

The study participants were selected through random sampling to give an equal chance of being selected from the 9th, 10th and 11th-grade students from Atatürk Anatolian High School in Siirt city centre. The participants were chosen from three different grades to discover whether their LLS preferences show a difference or not. 12th-grade students were not selected as participants for the study since they would enter the university entrance exams, making it difficult for them to be motivated and fill in the questionnaire willingly. The questionnaires without missing value were from 156 participants (100 female and 56 male participants. The age range of the participants was between 14-18. In each grade, the learners have four ESL classes.

4.3. Instruments

To discover the LLS used by the Anatolian High School students, the researcher used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990). Oxford has developed two models. The questionnaire designed for the native speakers of English has 80 items, and the one used by the researcher consisting of 50 items is used for the learners who are learning English as a foreign and second language. The questionnaire has two categories: Direct Category: having Memory, Cognitive and Compensation sub-categories and Indirect Category: Metacognitive, Affective and Social strategies. The researcher will use the SILL in the mother tongue of the participants (Turkish) adapted by Cesur and Fer (2007) to assure understanding and more reliable results. The adapted and the original version of the SILL make use of a five-point Likert scale. The reliability of the instrument was .94, and it can be concluded that it is reliable.

Table 1. *SILL Categorisation of Strategies*

SILL Parts Group	Number of Items	What strategies are covered	Strategy
Part A	9	Retrieving efficiently	Memory
Part B	14	Making use of mental processes	Cognitive
Part C	6	Compensating the missing knowledge	Compensation
Part D	9	Planning and assessing the learning	Metacognitive
Part E	6	Controlling the effects	Affective

Part F	6	Using the environment	Social

4.4. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to the participants after the necessary permissions were taken from the university's ethics committee and Siirt Provincial Directorate of National Education. The researcher asked the participants to take the questionnaires and submit them after completing them to avoid time and peer pressure.

4.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The data gathered through SILL from the questionnaires with no missing value were analysed through the SPSS software (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics were utilised to shed light on the data collected for the study. The relation between language learning strategies and the self-efficacy beliefs of the participants were analysed using Pearson and Spearman correlation following the normality distribution of data.

5. Results

Although various personal differences affect learning English as a foreign or second language, the study variables of the study were language learning strategy preferences and the role of gender in adapting them. The research findings have been analysed in this section. The participants of the study were 106 females (68 per cent) and 50 males (per cent 32). There were variations in the participants' gender distribution since they were randomly selected by computer software. In Table 2, the gender distribution of the participants was given.

Table 2. *Gender Distribution of the Participants*

Groups	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Female	106	68
Male	50	32
Total	156	100

5.1. Language Learning Preferences of High School Students

In order to discover the role of gender in language learning strategies used in the high school context in the city centre of Siirt, descriptive statistics were computed:

RQ :1 What kind of language learning strategies are used by Turkish high students? In the table 3, descriptive statistics were provided on the general use of language learning strategies.

Table 3. *Use of Overall Language Learning Strategies*

Strategy	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Strategies	156	3.00	.82
Metacognitive Strategies	156	3.00	.93
Memory Strategies	156	2.86	.78
Compensation Strategies	156	2.82	.73
Cognitive Strategies	156	2.76	.77
Affective Strategies	156	2.61	.71

Social strategies were the most commonly used language learning strategies by the participants. M= 3.00 was the mean for social strategies. To overcome the challenges they face on their way to learn English, they communicate.

The second widely applied strategies by the participants were metacognitive. When learners strive to find better ways to learn English, they try to handle their time effectively and use the tools to practice the target language; they apply metacognitive strategies, and the mean was M=3.00 for the metacognitive strategies.

Memory strategies were the third widespread strategy adopted by the participants. The mean was M=2.86. Learners using retention methods typically aim to use as many approaches as possible to memorise the new vocabulary. They try to connect the newly learned and the formerly learned linguistic items using the schemas they have already built.

Compensation strategies with a mean of M=2.82 followed the memory strategies. When language learners do not have sufficient English knowledge, they try to compensate for their lack of knowledge by using some methods such as using gestures, attempting to predict what the speaker will say next, and even creating new words themselves when these techniques do not work.

The least commonly used strategies by high school students were cognitive and affective strategies. The mean for cognitive strategies was M=2.77 and M=2.61 for effective strategies. Participants were not in favour of initiating dialogues and did not attempt to pronounce sounds that were not present in their FL. Students in high school could not regulate their emotions and, since they were frightened of making mistakes, they did not volunteer to use the target language.

5.2. Role of Gender in Using Language Learning Strategies

Whether gender has a role or not was the second research question that the researcher wanted to examine. The descriptive statistics of sub-categories belonging to SILL regarding gender differences were presented in the current chapter. The statistics were presented in table 4.3.

Table 4. *Strategy Preferences of Participants Regarding Gender Differences*

Strategy	Gender	M	Sd.	P
Memory	Female	2.86	.78	.213
	Male	2.75	.70	
Cognitive	Female	2.80	.78	.724
	Male	2.67	.75	
Compensation	Female	2.86	.78	.081
	Male	2.73	.61	
Metacognitive	Female	3.16	.93	.001
	Male	2.64	.83	
Affective	Female	2.64	.70	.954
	Male	2.54	.73	
Social	Female	3.09	.80	.059
	Male	2.82	.83	

There was statistically no substantial difference between female and male use of social strategies p=.059. The average was 3.09 for female students and M=2.82 for males. The female participants used more social strategies than the male participants, but the difference was small and statistically insignificant. The results for the use of metacognitive strategies were presented in Table 4.4.2. For the social strategies, the highest mean for both genders was for item 45. For females, the mean of the item was M=3.80, and for males, the mean was M=3.34. Many of the students make clarification requests and ask the speaker to speak more slowly.

The descriptive statistics for using metacognitive strategies revealed that the main discrepancy between female and male participants of the study was for metacognitive strategies, with a statistically significant difference of p=.001. The mean was M=3.16 for females, and the mean was M=2.64 for males. The findings indicate that metacognitive techniques are used by female learners more often than male learners. For female participants, the highest mean score was for item 32. M=3.72 was the mean score for females. Thirty-five per cent of females still pay attention to the speaker when someone talks in English. For the male

participants, the highest mean score was for item 38. The mean score was 2.98, which means that % of 34 male participants evaluated their English improvement.

For memory strategies, the mean scores of both genders were close. There was statistically no significant difference between the mean scores and p= .213. For the female learners, the mean score was M=2.86, and for the male participants, it was M= 2.75. The female participants' highest mean score was for item 9, and it was M=3.28 which indicates that the females try to recall the word in which context they came across for the first time. The highest mean for the males was for item 1. % 32, which points out that they try to bridge the newly learnt linguistic items with the former ones.

The mean for both genders' compensation strategy preferences was close, and the difference between them was not statistically significant p= .081. for the female participants the mean M=2.86, and for the males, it was M=2.73. The female students' highest mean score in compensation strategies was for item 24, and it was M=3.11. Twenty-nine female students declared that they often try to guess the new words' meaning when they do not know their meaning. The highest mean score in the category for the male participants for item 29 and was M=2.96. Sixteen male students expressed that when they do not remember a word, they substitute it with a synonym of it or they paraphrase it.

As memory, compensation, and social strategies, the female participants used cognitive strategies more frequently than the males. The difference between the two genders was not statistically significant p= .724. The mean score for females' cognitive strategy was M=2.80, and for the male participants, it was M=2.67. Language learners who use cognitive strategies tend to compare their L1 and the target language they try to acquire. The highest mean for female language learners was for item 16 in cognitive language learning strategies, and it was M=3.41. The female participants indicated that they were keen on reading text in their target language rather than their L1. For the males, the highest mean was M=3.22, and it was for item 15. The male participants favoured watching television programs and movies in English rather than reading texts in it.

The least preferred strategies were affective strategies for both genders. The mean for the female participants' affective strategies category was M=2.64, and for the males, it was M=2.54. The difference between the mean scores of females (p= .944) and statistically not significant. The top-rated item for both female and male participants was item 42. Thirty-nine female and twenty-one

male participants asserted that they try to control their negative feelings when they feel anxious or stressed.

In their categorisation Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) defined the mean scores from 1.0 to 2.4 as low, 2.5 to 3.4 medium and 3.5 to 5.0 as high strategy use. In the current study, the mean scores for the SILL categories were between 2.6 and 3.0, and the researcher came up with a medium strategy to use for all of the SILL sub-categories.

While analysing the findings, the researcher discovered that both genders' mean scores were close except for the metacognitive strategies. Female participants were superior to males in using metacognitive strategies in their language learning continuum. Both genders applied the language learning strategies at a medium level. All of the language LLS were used by females more frequently than the male participants of the study. Social strategies the most preferred LLS in the high school context by the participants; however, when gender is considered a determinant factor, metacognitive strategies were the most preferred strategies by females. No high or low strategy use was discovered for any of the categories of SILL in the current study context.

6. Conclusion

The current study aimed to reveal the LLS preferences of high school students and the role of gender in using them in the language learning continuum. The data collected from 156 participants were analysed, and descriptive statistics were put into use, and a comparison with the literature was made if the findings of the study were linear or contradicting with the former studies conducted in different contexts. At the end of the study, recommendations were made for further studies conducted to discover the LLS applied in different contexts.

6.1. Conclusions and Discussions

Research Question 1: What are the strategy preferences of High School Students in Siirt? The researcher analysed the data collected through SILL designed by Oxford (1990), and it was discovered that the high school students in Siirt favoured social, metacognitive and memory LLS. The least favoured strategies were affective strategies by the participants of the study. All of the LLS strategies were applied at a medium level according to the categorisation of Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995). The mean scores for the overall LLS use were between *M*= 3.00 and *M*=2.61. The findings were linear with the studies conducted by Wharton (2000), Park (1997), Cephe and Yeşilbursa (2006),

Demirel (2012), Kılıç & Padem, (2014). In some other studies carried out by Nyikos and Oxford (1993), Phillips (1991), Green and Oxford (2005) in the high school context, high strategy use was reported.

The high school students adopted all sorts of LLS. High school students in Siirt used direct and indirect language learning strategies. The mean scores for sub-categories were close to each other. In Turkey's high school context, since they are in an exam-centred education system, it was not surprising for the researcher that the participants were not using a high level. Kumaravedivelu (1994) asserted that language learning pedagogies have to be pedagogies of possibility. As long as high school students have to be successful at multiple-choice exams to be educated in a good university and foreign language classes are not a part of these examinations, their motivation to learn foreign languages will not be high. In such an education system, as a result, language learning does not become a priority. If the exams cannot be taken out of the university entrance system by the Ministry of Education, at least foreign language classes can be adapted to these exams.

Research Question 2: Does gender affect the LLS preferences of language learners? In order to define the role of gender in language learning strategy preferences, the second research question was asked. When the data for the research question was analysed, it was found that female participants in the current study had greater frequency for all categories of language learning strategies. However, except for the metacognitive strategies, the gap between female and male participants was statistically insignificant. While the results of the current study are linear with the results of (Demirel, 2012; Green and Oxford, 1995; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Özmen and Gülleroğlu, 2013), they are not compatible with the results of Wharton (2000), who discovered that male students use language-learning strategies more often female students. Generally, female students are more often reported as using language learning strategies than males. However, some studies contradict this finding, which may be due to cultural differences since the roles and perceptions of both genders are influenced by cultural changes. These roles and their perceptions can affect women's self-efficacy and self-esteem in some male-dominated societies, as Tercanlıoğlu claimed (2004).

Recommendations for Further Studies

1. The present research was conducted to discover the strategies used for language acquisition and the role of gender in using them in their language

learning processes. More individual differences could be explored by scholars and the Ministry of Education, and curriculum developers can consider the outcomes of these studies.

2. This study used quantitative data to obtain data to classify Turkish students' interests in language learning strategies. The researchers may also use qualitative research design (interview, observation) in further studies to obtain more detailed data with the reasons behind their strategy preferences and use their ideas to make the language learning process more attractive.

3. This study was conducted in the high school context, thus to have data about the other contexts such as primary and secondary schools and universities, further studies need to be carried out.

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