A STUDY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF COLLEGE FEMALE STUDENTS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract: This paper investigated female ESL students' preferred language learning strategies in the Philippine context. In addition, the researchers also identified the most and least preferred language learning strategies and how a) task requirement; b) age; and c) length of time learning English, affect their use of language learning strategies. In doing so, 108 students were asked to answer 50-item questionnaire (SILL) developed by Oxford in the late 90's for students who are studying English as a second language. Descriptive statistics was applied with an addition of t-test ($α=0.05$) to determine whether the difference between the ages and the length of time the students studied English was significant or not. Results show that female students use all six language learning strategies, and that the most dominant of these strategies was Metacognitive. Also, only the length of time learning English does not directly influence the choice of language learning strategies.

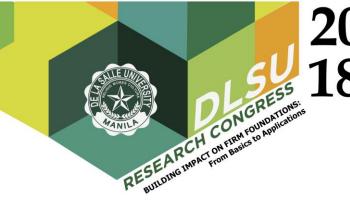**Key Words:** SILL, SLA, Language Learning Strategies, Cognitive/Metacognitive

1. INTRODUCTION

For the past years, there has been a shift of focus in the field of education: from being teacher-centered to learner-centered (Zare, 2010). In a learner-centered classroom, Altan and Trombly (2001 in Brown, 2003) explains that the challenges concerning the diversity of students are met, thus prioritizing the students' learning needs. This focus on the learners has led to a number of inquiries as to how students learn. In the area of second language acquisition, the question is "how DO students learn their/a second language?" Answers to this question begin with the definitions of two crucial terms language and learning. Producing a definition for the former is difficult (Aitchison, 1989, in Workman & Reader, 2008); as for the latter, it can be explained through Krashen's theory of it in contrast with the term acquisition.

As has been said, language has no exact definition, though there are ten criteria that enable one to identify whether a certain method of communication is a language or not. These ten criteria are: Use of vocal auditory channel, arbitrariness, semanticity, cultural transmission, spontaneous usage, turn taking, duality or double-articulation, displacement, structure dependence, and creativity (Aitchison, 1989, in Workman & Reader, 2008). As for learning vis-à-vis acquisition, Krashen (1982, in Schütz, 2007) explains that learning is the result of formal education wherein the student is fully aware of the process that leads him to the actual knowledge about the language. The student, therefore, is conscious of the rules of the language derived from his formal exposure and traditional instruction in grammar. Acquisition, on the other hand, is the result of a student's meaningful interaction with the native speakers of his target language (Schütz, 2007).

As this present paper's concern is on second language acquisition, the focus is on the formal

setting of mastering the target language, thus concentrating on the learning of it. In this regard, the learning of the target language is considered as a cognitive skill, or that, it uses cognitive approaches or cognitive activities (O'Mally & Chamot, 1990; Bender, 2003). This is fortified by O'Mally and Chamot (1990), in their statement that in order for students to be successful in learning it [second language], they must be able to "describe how knowledge about language is stored in memory and how the process of second language acquisition ultimately results in automatic language comprehension and production" (p. 1).

The operative word on this statement by O'Mally and Chamot (1990) is "process" as more research studies concerning second language acquisition no longer focus on comprehension and production alone; rather, the focus shifted from the mere product of learning a language to the process of learning a language (Rahimi, Riazi & Saif, 2008). As a result, language learning strategies "emerged not only as integral components of various theoretical models of language proficiency but also as a means of achieving learners' autonomy in the process of language learning" (p. 32). Thus, this paper focuses on the language learning strategies of female students learning English as a second language, and the factors that have influenced these students' choice of language learning strategy or strategies.

In the aforementioned studies, it was observed that most of them aimed on identifying the strategies of the learners and the factors that affected these strategies. Most of these studies, mostly EFL, suggest that females consistently use language learning strategies compared to males at a significantly higher rate. To add to the growing literature, this study is slanted in investigating whether the case of the EFL female students is true on the female ESL students in terms of language learning strategies as categorized by Oxford (1990). More than that affirmation, the researchers also looked into the most and least preferred language learning strategies, and the factors that affect these strategies.

With regard to factors, the focus on the task requirement, age, and the number of years learning is on the basis of the target school of this research study. For the task, there are two basic task requirements for first year and second year students: writing and speaking. The age and the number of years learning English are based on the year levels

mentioned above. As results of this study would greatly help in the planning of classroom activities and in the conception and making of subject syllabi, the researchers aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Do female students use all language learning strategies?
2. What is the dominant strategy of these female students?
3. What is the least used strategy of these female students?
4. How does these female students' task requirement, together with their ages and their length of time learning English, affect their use of language learning strategies?

2. MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This research study is descriptive in nature which focused only on the identification of the learning strategies and the analysis of the factors that could affect these learning strategies of female students. Descriptive statistics was applied, attaining only the mean and standard deviation as the questionnaire administered to the respondents used the five-point Likert Scale. In addition, t-test ($\alpha=0.05$) was used in determining whether the difference between the ages and the length of time the students studied English was significant or not.

The study was conducted in two classroom settings. The first group (E101) of respondents focused on the reading-to-writing connection. The second group (E102) of respondents focused on the speaking skills. These students also had to undergo a number of speaking performances.

A total of 108 respondents comprised the sample group for the study. For the E101 group, a total of 69 students participated; as for the E102 group, a total of 39 students. The E101 students' ages range from 15 to 20, while the E102 students' ages range from 17 to 21. All respondents were female in an exclusive school in the Philippines.

2.2 Instrument and Method of Analysis

The study used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1989) for students who are studying English as a

second language. For the statistical method employed by the researchers for the item analyses of the data, the means and standard deviation were computed. Mean is the representative measure of the set of observations/data while the standard deviation is the average gap, distance and the deviation from the mean. To answer the first question, Oxford's (1989) classification of the questionnaire was as follows: Part A (Memory), question numbers 1 to 9; Part B (Cognitive), question numbers 10 to 23; Part C (Metacognitive), question numbers 24 to 29; Part D, question numbers 30 to 38; Part E, question numbers 39 to 44; and Part F, question numbers 45 to 50.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Each statement in the SILL was tallied, and the mean was taken and standard deviation was taken. After which, the mean of all means was computed for the basis of the interpretation. Results of this show that female students use all the six strategies, as supported by previous studies (Zare, 2010; Hashemi, 2011) In addition, the cognitive and metacognitive strategies are the leading strategies employed by females, with the latter as the mostly used one. As mentioned earlier, this present study's goal is to find out if ESL female students have similarities with EFL female students, and this result confirms it. In comparison with ESL studies, this result further affirms that ESL learners mostly use metacognitive strategies. Studies done by Goh and Foong (1997), Cabaysa and Baetiong (2010), and Sioson (2011) confirm this.

With regard to the dominant strategy, metacognitive is the highest, with a mean of almost 4.0. With this, the query is on how these students apply metacognitive strategies. A closer look then on the statements under metacognitive strategies is needed. To do so, each statement under this strategy was examined by getting the mean and the standard deviation for each; the interpretation is based on the mean.

The two most dominant metacognitive strategies, with means of at least 4.0, are: (statement 8) I have clear goals for improving my SL skills; and (statement 9) I think about my progress in learning SL. On the other hand, the least used is statement 5, which discloses that these female students

interestingly do not plan their schedule as to have sufficient time for studying SL.

According to Zare (2010), metacognitive strategies are strategies that mean thinking not of what has been learned, but on how learning was achieved. As Mokhtari (2007) suggested, since metacognitive strategies enable students to gain control over their learning, these students use these strategies in order for them to clearly set their minds towards their goals (statement 8) and become conscious of how they are achieving these goals (statement 9).

With regard to the least used strategy, the the affective, with a mean of roughly 3.0. One study by Zare (2010) shows a similar finding regarding Iranian learners wherein they also used the affective strategies the least. For these Iranian learners, they are reserved and conservative with their feelings. However, the Iranian learners are EFL and have a different reason for these ESL female students of the present study.

To answer research question 2, it is first important to establish that previous studies have indicated that there are a number of factors that affect the students' use of language learning strategies. From previous studies, these factors include cultural background, gender, and level of proficiency. From theorists, such as Ellis (1994), important factors that affect strategy use are learners' beliefs towards the target language, the learner factors of age and motivation, and the learner's personal background. In this present study, the three factors that are looked into are the tasks, the age, and the length of time learning English. In order to achieve this, the participants were divided into two: the E101 group, wherein the students are learning Reading and Writing; and the E102 group, wherein the students are learning Public Speaking. The data were analyzed using t-test with a level of significance set at 0.05.

Clearly, these two groups have significantly different learning tasks. As for the age and the length of time learning English in relation to these tasks it was found that there was no significant difference. This means that these two groups had more or less the same number of years studying English. The results then regarding the difference in the strategies used by E101 and E102 students is not a direct result of the number of years learning English.

According to Ellis (1994), age is considered as a clear factor in the learners' use of strategies: the

younger learners tend to employ strategies that deal with task-specific manner, or strategies that are simple; while the older learners or adults, on the other hand, tend to use complex strategies or generalized strategies which they can use variably. Now, looking at the ages of the E101 students and E102 students, the significant difference between the ages does not technically mean one group is younger and the other is older; this only suggests that the ages of E102 students are technically higher than the ages of E01 students.

As for the task requirement, as mentioned above, tasks are significantly different; however, the question is: does the difference matter in the choice of strategies? To answer this, the questionnaires were segregated into two groups, and each of the statements was analyzed by getting the mean as the basis for interpretation. Then, ranking was done as to which is the dominant strategy for each group. Results show that the two groups of students have the same leading strategies: the metacognitive and the cognitive strategies – ranking one and two, respectively. The differences begin from the third to the last rank. For E101, the ranking of the six strategies is as follows: (1) Metacognitive, with a mean of 3.47; (2) Cognitive, with a mean of 3.35; (3) Compensation, with a mean of 3.35; (4) Social, with a mean of 3.01; (5) Memory, with a mean of 2.94; and (6) Affective with a mean of 2.90. As for E102, the ranking is: (1) Metacognitive, with a mean of 3.70; (2) Cognitive, with a mean of 3.67; (3) Social, with a mean of 3.56; (4) Memory, with a mean of 3.41; (5) Compensation, with a mean of 3.35; and (6) Affective, with a mean of 3.28.

Based on the ranking above, the students' task requirements which affect their use of strategies was investigated by discussing the top three strategies for each group. The comparison between the metacognitive and cognitive strategies used by the two groups was done by examining each statement under these two strategies. The mean was computed for each of these statements, and the results show that both groups similar dominant metacognitive strategies. This also means that both groups try to find out how to become a better student; both groups pay attention when someone is talking using English; and both groups notice their mistakes in order not to commit the same ones in the future.

From metacognitive strategy, the second mostly used strategy is cognitive. It is worth noting

again that both E101 and E102 have the same primary cognitive strategy, which is watching TV programs or movies in the second language. The point that could be derived here is that both E101 and E102 students employ the same strategies, considering that all of their means are 3.5 and above which indicate a high rate of frequency. Again, regardless of task, both E101 and E102 practice their sounds, skim and read materials in the target language, and they write using the target language. This proves that in spite of the difference in the major tasks required for each subject, the students employ the strategies that connect all language skills generally used in learning a language. This affirms the theory of Mercer (2009) that reading is not a simple task of identifying symbols or recognizing meaningful letters that form a word; fluent reading is achieved if there is effective listening.

As discussed, both E101 and E102 students use metacognitive and cognitive strategies. However, the difference between E101 and E102 slightly differs in their third mostly used strategy. The E101 students used Compensation Strategy, while the E102 students used Social Strategies. Compensation Strategies are those that involve students doing alternative actions in order to overcome their lack in the target language. As one of the mostly used strategy in this study, this result is no surprise as this is considered to be among the most important strategy for intermediate students (Oxford, 1990).

In this case, these E101 students ranked statement 6 as the highly used strategy: If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing. According to Oxford (1990), this strategy belongs to the subset: "Overcoming Limitations in Speaking and Writing" and true enough, as E101 is a writing class

The second and third highly used compensation strategies of E101 students are: I try to guess what the other person will say next in the SL; and to understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses. Both statements involve guessing or making use of linguistic cues. These students employ this strategy in their reading most of the time as linguistic cues are the foundation of having correct guesses on the meaning of written passages. Though statement 5 may refer to guessing the next word of the speaker, making an inference from listening is a way of increasing vocabulary, which eventually be a great help in these students' writing tasks.

The top three social strategies that they use are: I ask questions in SL; I try to learn about the culture of SL speakers, and I ask the person to slow down or say it again. These three strategies could be brought about their activities regarding interviews or panel discussions, and group presentations wherein they have to ask in English.

As mentioned, the significant difference in their ages does not make the E101 students as the younger learners and the E102 students as the older learners in this study. Technically, it can only be said that the E102 students' ages are significantly higher than the E101 students. Since both E101 and E102 students are college students, these students are intermediate learners. Thus, the question is: how does this age difference between two groups of adult learners differ in these students' strategy use?

Ellis (1994) pointed out that adult language learners tend to use complex strategies and generalized strategies compared to younger language learners who use simple ones. As the E102 have a technically significant higher age than E101, a deeper analysis was done with regards to the E102 students' use of strategies in their order of preference or ranking. Most of their strategies are on the same rank, meaning they have the same computed mean. This implies that these E102 students use these simultaneously. This could be what theorists believe as the complexity of older learners' use of language learning strategies. Interestingly, these strategies that are used simultaneously by the E102 students belong to the top four strategies that they use, namely, Metacognitive, Cognitive, Social, and Memory – in this order.

Also, most of the pairs belong to different subsets of metacognitive. One could be under Arranging and Planning, while the other is under Evaluating. This shows how complex and active adult learners are in their use of language learning strategies. In contrast, the E101 students rarely had strategies that have the same mean. Based on the data tallied, the E101 students only had two simultaneous strategies in Compensation and Metacognitive. Moreover, from these two simultaneous strategies, one pair belonging to the Metacognitive strategies belong to the same subset. This means that it is not as complex as the simultaneous strategies employed by the E102 students.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results confirmed that female students indeed use all six language learning strategies, and that the most dominant of these strategies was Metacognitive, This result on the dominant strategy confirms that ESL female students are similar to EFL female students based on the cited previous studies. Moreover, it confirms that ESL students in general employ Metacognitive strategies. However, the result on the affective strategy as the least used strategy contrasts ESL female students from EFL female students based on the cited previous studies. Nonetheless, it confirms that ESL students in general use Affective strategies the least; or if not, it is in the bottom list of preferences.

As for the factors that affect this use of language learning strategies, it was observed that the number of years learning English does not directly influence the choice of language learning strategies used by female students.

In addition, in the aspect of task requirement as a factor, it was discovered that regardless of the task requirement, E101 and E102 students mostly use metacognitive and cognitive strategies, even an in-depth analysis of the sub-strategies of these two main strategies reveal no difference between the two. Though they might be a difference in the ranking, the strategies are still in the range of 3.5 and above, which indicates a high rate of frequency use. Nonetheless, the third mostly used strategy for the two groups differ, as E101 students prefer compensation strategy, while E102 students prefer social strategy. It is on this level that the task requirement has influenced one way or another.

As for age, the data showed that both groups are intermediate learners or adult learners; however, the significant difference in the two groups ages suggest that one is technically older students. This group is the E102 students. Deeper investigation on the strategies used by this group of students revealed that older students tend to employ more complex strategies; they use simultaneous strategies within a strategy, making them more active in the language learning process. More than this, this simultaneous strategies are most likely to be in different categories.

Based on the results of this study vis-à-vis other previous studies, results confirm what Oxford (1990, in Aslan, 2009) explained that language learning strategies are not always seen on the same sequence or pattern. This is due to the variety and the individuality of the learners. Though researchers may find general similarities, these strategies still highly depend on the individual. Nonetheless, as teachers teach a number of students simultaneously,

it is still beneficial to identify the strategies of their students.

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