Language Learning Strategies Use by Saudi EFL Students: The Effect of Duration of English Language Study and Gender

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Abstract—This paper reports findings from a study that investigated language learning strategies (LLS) used by Saudi EFL students at Aljouf University. A total of 134 students (66 males, 68 females) completed a questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The aim of the study was to better understand the relationship between the use of LLS and gender and duration of English language study. The results showed that the average of strategy use was in the low to medium range. Cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies were used most frequently, while memory and affective strategies were reported to be least frequently used. The results also showed that female students used more LLS than male students, although the difference was not significant. No significant difference was found in relation to duration of studying English, although students with long duration reported using LLS most frequently. Pedagogical implications of these findings are discussed in relation to Saudi EFL context.

Index Terms—cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, English as a foreign language, intensive English learning, learning strategies, strategy inventory for language learning (SILL)

I. INTRODUCTION

Research into LLS has attracted the attention of many researchers and educators, who are gradually shifting their focus from teachers and teaching to learners and learning. In other words, efforts to improve language teaching methodology have moved from the domain of language teaching to language learning. According to Corder (1981), the cognitive view of learning, which regards language learning as a dynamic, original process and learners as active strategy users and knowledge constructors had a great influence on this shift.

Since the 1970s, according to Chang (2011), learning strategies (LSs) have received increasing attention from researchers and educators in the fields of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) in relation to how languages are learned differently by individual learners (Chang, 1999; Cohen, 1998). The importance of language learning strategy use (LLSU) was reported by other research and identified the range and nature of LLSU among good or effective language learners (Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford, 2003; Green and Oxford, 1995). According to Chamot (2001), "applied research on LS has two main goals: the first one is to identify and compare the learning strategies used by more and less successful language learners, and the second goal is to provide instruction to help less successful learners become more proficient in their language study" (pp.25-26). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) considered strategies as tools for active, self-directed involvement that are necessary for the development of SL/FL communicative ability. In recent years, researchers have identified key areas of individual difference that can influence the choice of LLS and the frequency of their use (Chang, 2003; Griffiths, 2003; Lan, 2005). Factors that have been found to influence learning strategies use are language proficiency level, learning duration, gender, age, cultural background, motivation, and language being learned.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers in several countries have investigated LLS and factors that affect their use LLS. Most studies have employed the SILL questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990). The present study examines two factors that have been found to affect the use of LLS: gender, and duration of studying English.

A. Language Learning Strategies

LLS have been used for thousands of years, although they have been formally identified only recently. Research on LLS has increased significantly since the 1970s. Areas of research interest include how learners go about learning something, what makes learners successful at learning something, and why some people are more effective at learning than others. LLSAs Williams and Burden (1997) point out, investigating learning strategies (LSs) will answer these questions. Research suggests that training learners to use LLS can help them to become successful language learners and that is what make LLS are important. LLS enable learners to take more responsibility and to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. In other words, LSs are procedures that facilitate learning tasks (Chamot, 2005). They also

enable learners to become autonomous, lifelong learners and independent, (Little, 1991). LLS represent steps that learners take to manage their learning and achieve their goals. They LLS are important for SL/FL learning and teaching because they develop learning autonomy and language competence and are tools for active, self-directed involvement. Effective LLS can also help "unsuccessful" learners to realise why they are "unsuccessful", and assist learners to plan their learning (Brown, 1994; Chamot, 1999; Gregersent, 2001). They also help teachers plan their teaching (Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998; Murat, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). According to Murat (2000), the ultimate goal of empirical research in this area is to develop knowledge that is useful for improving language learning and teaching in ESL and EFL classrooms.

According to (Oxford, 1990, p. 9), LLS have the following features:
• "contribute to the main goal - communicative competence;
• allow learners to become more self-directed;
• expand the role of teachers;
• are problem-oriented;
• are specific actions taken by the learner;
• involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive;
• support learning both directly and indirectly;
• are not always observable;
• are often conscious;
• can be taught;
• are flexible;
• are influenced by a variety of factors"

In summary, LLS are applied by language learners as a means of acquiring and using information for storage and recall. According to Oxford, et al. (2014, "If the field of language learning strategies has sometimes been criticized for a degree of inconsistency in definitions, categorization, and invention outcomes [……], one reason might be the different theoretical perspectives that have been allowed to bloom the grow within this field" (p.46). These issues are discussed in the following sections.

B. Definitions of Language Learning Strategies

LLSs have been defined in various ways since they became an area of research interest in second language acquisition (SLA). In general and according to Rigney, (1978), LLS refers to specific steps or actions taken by the learner to facilitate acquisition, retention, retrieval and performance. According to Wenden (1987), LLS can be defined in relation to language learning behaviours (such as learning and regulating the meaning of a second or foreign language), cognitive theory (such as learners' strategic knowledge of language learning), and their affective aspects (such as learners' motivation and attitudes). Wenden (1991) and Rubin (1994) suggested that LLS are plans, routines and operations used by the learner to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information. According to these authors, the objective in using LLS is to memorize language information, recall that information and use it in a different situation. In other words, LLS refer to what students do to learn and to regulate their learning. Similarly, Richard and Platt (1992) defined LLS as an intentional behaviour that helps learners understand, learn and remember new information. Oxford (1990) broadens the scope of this definition, proposing that the objective of using LLS is to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, self-directed, effective and transferrable to new situations.

Cohen (1998) argues that LLS are consciously selected by the learner. LLS can therefore be defined as conscious, selected behaviours, used to overcome certain educational challenges, which vary depending on the nature of the problem. They are used to memorize information, to synthesize it, or to use that information in speaking or writing. Tudor (1996) described LLS as the purposeful actions learners engage in consciously or unconsciously in order to enhance skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing of a foreign or second language. Further, Learners develop an awareness of their own metacognition and thus control their own learning through LLS. When learners have awareness of their own learning processes, strategies and preferences, they will able to regulate their learning endeavours to meet their ultimate goals; they become increasingly independent and self-directed learners (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Rubbin, 1999). According to Chamot (2004), defines LLS as "the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve learning goals" (p. 14). Recently, LLS have been defined as the learner's consciously chosen tools for active, self-regulated improvement of language learning (Griffiths, 2008b; Oxford, 2011b). In the present paper, LLS is defined as actions taken by learners to enhance their language skills.

C. Classification of Language Learning Strategies

A taxonomy, according to Richard Platt and Platt (1992), is the classification of items into classes and sub-classes. Classification systems of LLS vary according to the different criteria on which they are based (Rubin, 1981; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990a; Cohen, 1998). Every classification system involves an implicit theory about the nature of L2 learning strategies and even, to some extent, about L2 learning in general. Oxford's (1990) work will be discussed in detail because her Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is the most influential instrument in the area of LLS and lays out the most exhaustive hierarchy of learning strategies to date. Oxford's (1990a) taxonomy of LLS was used in the present study. This taxonomy systematically links individual strategies and strategy groups with each of the

four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) that are incrementally acquired during the language development process (Oxford, 1990).

D. Oxford's Taxonomy

Based on earlier research into learning strategies, Oxford (1990) cited in (Paredes, 2010) developed a new language learning strategy system based on earlier research into learning strategies. She classified LLS into two groups: direct and indirect learning strategies. Direct learning strategies involve the specific use of language and are classified into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Indirect learning strategies do not use language directly but support and manage language learning; they are categorised into metacognitive, affective and social strategies (Oxford, 1990a).

E. Direct Strategies

Direct learning strategies can be categorized as memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies. Memory strategies help learners to link one L2 item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding (Oxford, 2003, p.13). Various memory-related strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an orderly string (e.g., acronyms), while other techniques create learning and retrieval via sounds (e.g., rhyming), images (e.g., a mental picture of the word itself or the meaning of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g., the keyword method), body movement (e.g., total physical response), mechanical means (e.g., flashcards), or location (e.g., on a page or blackboard) (Oxford, 2003). Cognitive strategies helps the learner to use the language material in direct ways through note-taking, reasoning, outlining synthesizing, reorganizing information to develop stronger schemas, summarizing, practicing structures and sounds formally and practicing in naturalistic settings (Oxford, 2003). Compensation strategies enable learners to use the language either in speaking or writing despite knowledge gaps. These strategies are divided into two sets which are guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (Zare, 2012). Cohen (1998) cited in Oxford (2003) asserted that compensation strategies that are used for speaking and writing (often known as a form of communication strategies) are intended only for language use and must not be considered to be language learning strategies.

F. Indirect Strategies

As discussed earlier, Oxford's (1990a) indirect learning strategies can be categorized as social, affective and metacognitive. Indirect strategies manage and support language learning, often without involving the target language directly. Social strategies provide increased interaction and more empathetic understanding, since they occur among and between people (Canale, 1983) cited in (Paredes, 2010). An example of a social strategy is asking the speaker to repeat, paraphrase, and slow down, and so forth to aid comprehension. Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence and perseverance needed for learners to involve themselves actively in language learning, for example, lowering anxiety levels by laughing at their own mistakes (Vlckova, et al, 2013).

Metacognitive strategies are aspects associated with planning, monitoring, and evaluating the language learning process (Fewell, 2010). Learners seek out or create opportunities to practice the new language in naturalistic situations (e.g. joining a conversation club) (Paredes, 2010). Despite disagreements about the classification of LLS, these strategies help language learners take control of their learning, become more competent and, most importantly, become autonomous (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Vandergrift, 2002; Paredes, 2010)).

According to Ellis (994) Oxford's SILL is considered as the most comprehensive classification of LLS and has been used extensively for collecting data on large numbers of language learners across the globe (Green & Oxford, 1995; Wharton, 2000; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Lan & Oxford, 2003). This standardised instrument has been translated to many languages. Researchers used it extensively to collect data on large numbers of mostly foreign language learners, and has also been employed in studies that correlate strategy use with variables such as gender, proficiency level, learning styles, culture and years of studying the language (Green & Oxford, 1995; Bedell & Oxford, 1996; Wharton, 2000; Bruen, 2001). Since this study explores the effects of gender, year of study in the university, and duration of studying English on strategy preferences.

G. Gender

Several studies have established the existence of gender differences in the use of LLS. Politzer (1983) found that female students used more social strategies than their male students. Oxford & Nyikos, 1989 found that, in their study about the use of LLS by undergraduate learners of foreign languages that females reported to use cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies more frequently than males. (Nyikos, 1990; Tran, 1988), found in their study that males used particular strategies greater than females. Tran (1988) explored the level of acculturation of immigrant Vietnamese, aged 40-92 years, in the U.S. findings revealed that males reported to use more strategies to learn and to improve their English language skills. Moreover, Nyikos (1990) found that males made greater use of specific strategies in an investigation into possible test type bias in tests of recall among university level beginner learners of German.

Ehrman and Oxford (1989) found that female learners used strategies for searching, functional practice strategies, self-management strategies and communicating meaning more than females. Gender differences in LLS use were also reported in some early studies in Taiwan by Yang (1993) and Sy (1994, 1995). Furthermore, Green and Oxford (1995) found that females use strategies greater than males. However, Wharton, (2000) found that Singaporean university male

students reported using more strategies than females. \ Lou (1998) and Peng (2001) found that there was no significant gender differences. Gender differences are also reflected in the type of strategy used by males and females. Female learners found to use more conversational and input strategies (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989), more social learning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989), and more memory and metacognitive strategies (Khalil, 2005) than their male learners. In contrast to these findings, Shmais (2003) did not find any differences between males and females in strategy use among university-level students. This might be because the sample in this study comprised university English majors, who are typically more aware than other groups of the process of learning a foreign language and of the strategies required to obtain proficiency. Similarly, Wharton (2000) did not find any gender effects in either the number or type of strategy used by bilingual foreign language learners in Singapore. Again, this might be attributed to the language learning abilities of bilingual learners, which may have nullified any gender differences.

Mat Teh and et al. (2009) investigated LLS use by Arabic students. Compensation and affective strategies were reported to be used most frequently, and social and cognitive strategies were used least. The findings also showed significant gender differences in the overall use of LLS, with overall female students tending to use them more often than males.

Abu Radwan (2011) conducted a study to examine the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the variables of gender, English proficiency and duration of studying English. 128 students majoring in English at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman participated in the study. Results revealed that students metacognitive strategies is reported to be sued significantly more than any other category of strategies, and memory strategies reported the least used strategies by the subjects. Moreover, social strategies were reported to be used more by male students than female students, thus creating the only difference between the two groups in terms of their strategic preferences. Chang (2011) conducted a preliminary study to profile foreign LLS use by 360 universality undergraduate English major students in Taiwan. Four variables - gender, students' major, fondness of the English language and previous experience in a English speaking countries were used to analyze the relationships with the participants' LLS use. Overall, the most used category was compensation. Social strategies ranked second, while the memory strategy category was the least used. There were significant gender differences in most of the strategy items, with males using them more frequently than females.

H. Duration of English Study

LLS research has consistently established a positive relationship between the duration of English study and strategy use. Griffith (2003) reported in her study a positive relationship between the frequency of LLS use and students' level. Similarly, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) found that years of study have a significant effect on the use of learning strategies. Ramirez (1986) reported similar results in his study of adolescent learners of French L2. He compared university students with high school students, Khalil (2005) found that university students used more strategies than high school students. This might be a result of the increased demands that proficient learners encounter while communicating in the target language. A study by Magno (2010) invited 302 Korean students to complete the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. The results showed that, overall, the social and compensation categories were used most frequently, while the memory and cognitive categories were used least frequently. Further, the duration of studying English significantly affected the use of LLS, with those who been learning English for a long time using these strategies most frequently. Another study by Al-Buainain (2010) investigated the type and frequency of LLS usage among English majors in Qatar University. The participants were 120 Arabs enrolled in the Department of Foreign Languages representing different learning levels (Years 1-4). The results indicated that the students used learning strategies with high to medium frequency. They preferred using metacognitive strategies and showed least use of affective strategies. In general, the results suggest that there is a positive relationship between language learning strategy use and learning level (years of studying English). The greater the number of years spent learning English, the greater the strategy use. Differences were not significant.

A study of 502 students from three secondary schools in Hong Kong used an adapted version of the SILL survey instrument (Leung & Hui, 2011). The findings showed that the average of strategy use fell in the medium range. The three most frequently used categorical strategies were compensative, metacognitive and affective. Although there was a positive relationship between duration of language exposure and LLS use, the differences were not significant. These findings are consistent with those of Tse (2011). In Oxford's framework, it is possible to differentiate one factor from another, but the time spent in learning the English language is not included. Yet the acquisition of a new language may vary depending on the length of exposure to formal education. Hence the present study includes the duration of formal English language study as a variable in the investigation of LLS usage.

One can conclude that, although some progress has been made in the conceptualization of strategies and their benefits, more empirical grounding and theoretical work is needed. This review of extant studies highlights the paucity LLS of knowledge about Arabic LLS in particular. This study will investigate the overall LLS use and the factors (gender, duration of studying English) that affect learning strategy choice.

I. Research Questions

  1. What are the most frequently used LLS among Saudi students majoring in English at JU?
  2. Does learner gender influence Saudi university EFL learners' use of LLS?

3. Are there any differences among learners in strategy use due to duration of studying English?

J. Purpose of the Study

Most LLS research studies have been undertaken in the target language setting. Only a handful have focused specifically on the LLS of students learning English in a foreign environment, mainly in the Arabic setting (Shmais, 2003; El-Dib, 2004; Al-Otaibi, 2004; Khalil, 2005; Al-Buainain, 2010; Abu-Radwan, 2011). This study investigates the overall LLS use by English major university students University at Aljouf University n Aljouf. More specifically, it investigates the effects of gender and duration of English language study.

III. METHODS

A. Participants

The participants were 134 (66 males, 68 females) majoring in English at Aljouf University in Saudi Arabia. Their age ranged between 23-27 years old. They were selected randomly to participate in the study and upon their willingness. All the subjects had studied English for at least nine years. The vast majority (98%) reported that they had never visited an English-speaking country.

B. Instruments

Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), version 7 to explore the types and frequency of use LLS with some modifications. The SILL has been used as a key instrument for LLS research since 1990 till date. Reliability coefficients for the SILL was reported by many studies to range from .85 to .98. This made it a trusted measure for judging students' reported LLS use (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Park, 1997; Bremner, 1998; Sheorey, 1999; Wharton, 2000; Griffiths, 2007; Paredes, 2010; Leung & Hui, 2011). The internal consistency of the revised SILL for the study was proven to be acceptable. The reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .89$) ensured the general reliability of the study (see Glass & Hopkins, 1996).In the SILL, LLS are classified into six categories for assessment: cognitive, metacognitive, memory, affective, compensation, and social strategies. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic and all explanations and instructions to follow were given in the subjects' first language (Arabic) to avoid any possible confusion or misunderstanding.The questionnaire comprised of 54 items. The students were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale. According to Oxford (19990), range of 3.5-5 is thought to reflect high use of that strategy, 2.5-3.4 medium use, and 1.0-2.4 low use.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered to 134 students in the second semester of the academic year 2015–2016. The administration was conducted in their classrooms with the help of class teachers. The researcher was present to answer questions that might be raised by the subjects. The students were told that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and their responses would be used for research purposes only. They were also informed that they have the right not to participate. The questionnaire results were analysed using SPSS 19 to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section first provides a description and analysis of the findings from the study of strategy use among Saudi EFL students majoring in English at Aljouf University. The following discussion focuses on the interpretation of the relationship between strategy use and gender and duration of studying English. The .05 level of statistical significance was set to all statistical tests in this study. The statistical data are presented according to the three research questions.

A. Overall Strategy Use

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE AND INFERENTIAL STATISTICS FOR LLS USE BY GENDER AND DURATION OF STUDY

Categories	Descriptive statistics				Inferential statistics			
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Gender		Duration	
					t	p	r	p
Cognitive	1.22	4.89	3.25	.603	1.613	.110	.119	.252
Metacognitive	1.75	5	3.06	.759	-1.572	.114	.098	.034
Compensation	2.40	3.06	2.88	.168	-.927	.356	.088	.401
Social	1.71	5	2.84	.779	-.229	.820	.132	.203
Memory	2.08	3.45	2.67	.311	-1.740	.085	.077	.464
Affective	2.36	2.93	2.63	1.89	-1.404	.164	.082	.434

The participants were found to be medium and low level strategy users in EFL learning, which suggests that they were relatively less sophisticated LLS users. There are two possible reasons for this. First, they were studying English in an EFL setting and did not need it for daily survival. Thus, it was not as urgent for them to use a wide range of strategies as it was for learners in an ESL setting. Second, it might indicate that these language learners were less

sophisticated than groups in other contexts, partly due perhaps to the absence of an input-rich environment. Such a finding is consistent with those from other strategy studies (Han & Lin, 2000; Nisbet, 2002; Yu, 2003; Al-Otaibi, 2004). As can be seen in Table 1, cognitive strategies ranked as the most frequently used strategy (mean=3.25, SD=.603), followed by metacognitive strategies (mean=3.06, SD=.759), compensation strategies (mean=2.88, SD =.168) and social strategies (mean=2.84, SD=.779); memory strategies and affective strategies were ranked as the least frequently used strategies (mean=2.67, SD=.311; mean=2.63, SD=1.89; respectively). This is consistent with Shamis (2003) and Al-Buainain (2010). The differences in frequency of use of each strategy were not great.

Cognitive strategies, which were most frequently used by study participants, are important in learning a new language because they work directly on incoming information (Oxford, 1990). The most frequently used of these were "writing and saying a new word many times in order to learn it", "watching movies in English" and "consciously learning new vocabulary". This is consistent with findings by Al-Otaibi (2004) and Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006). The least frequently used cognitive strategies were "writing diary in English" and "listening to the radio in English". Cognitive strategies were found in LLS research as the most popular strategies among L2 learners (Oxford, 1990).

The second most frequently used category of strategy among this study's participants were metacognitive strategies. These include exercising "executive control" over one's language learning through planning, organising, monitoring and evaluating, which helps learners to gain control over emotions and motivations related to language learning through self-monitoring. Thus, metacognitive learning strategies keep learners on the right track for learning, which is crucial in a foreign language input environment such as Saudi Arabia. In the current study, participants appeared to be familiar with the need to manage their learning processes and they adopted a number of metacognitive strategies to do so. "Learning from mistakes" and "using a self-study centre" were the most frequently reported metacognitive strategies, while "reading newspaper" and "noting language in the environment" were the least frequently used. This is likely because they live in a country in which English is not commonly used in the environment.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), cognitive (translating, analysing) and metacognitive (planning, organising) strategies are often used together, to support each other. In fact, using a combination of strategies often has more impact than single strategies. In the present study, students majoring in English are in an intensive learning environment, and this could contribute in various ways to their preference for using both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Learners majoring in English typically have a strong instrumental motivation to learn English. Griffiths and Oxford (2014) argue that there should be a coming together of researchers and theorists around the central cognitive and metacognitive aspects of LLS. The findings of high-frequency use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in the present study are consistent with those from previous research (Sheorey, 1999; Abu Shamis, 2003; Liu, 2004; Khalil, 2005; Riazi, 2007; Al-Buainain, 2010; Chang, 2011).

Compensation strategies, which ranked third, enable students to make up for missing knowledge in the process of understanding or producing target language (Al-Otaibi, 2004; Al-Buainain, 2010). Language learners use compensation strategies such as guessing the meaning of new words, using a word or phrase that means the same thing if they cannot think of a word, and making up new words if they don't know the right ones in English in order to maintain good communication even though they do not have sifficeint knowledge Grammar, vocabulary and other language components. Such findings are supported in other studies (e.g. Al-Otaibi, 2004; Riazi, 2007; Al-Buainain, 2010; Chang, 2011).

Social strategies were the fourth most frequently used strategies in this study. Participants showed a strong preference for learning with others by learning from the teacher, asking the other speaker to repeat and to speak slowly. In other words, they asked questions and cooperated with others. The curriculum in the Department of English is (to a certain extent) underpinned by a student-oriented philosophy. The recent development in the Saudi society and the importance of learning English in Saudi Arabia over the past few years, in both instruction and methodology, support and encourage the role of interactive learning in the development of greater linguistic fluency. These findings are consistent with those in the literature (e.g. Phillip, 1999; Al-Buainain, 2010; Tse, 2011; Chang, 2011).

The least favoured strategies reported by the subjects in this study were memory strategies and affective strategies, respectively. The low use of memory strategies was a surprising results. Such strategies are largely in keeping with instructional delivery systems typically used by many Arab countries, which are frequently didactic and emphasised rote memorisation. Effective memory strategies are believed to involve an imaginative component as well as memory. It is possible that the subjects in this study were not familiar with the use of mnemonics (specific techniques to enhance memory) and therefore used fewer memory strategies. Lee and Oxford (2008) pointed out that the construction of memory items in the SILL includes a range of memory strategies based on visual, auditory and kinaesthetic modalities that might not be applicable to Saudi students. The most frequently reported memory strategies in the present study were connecting words with mental pictures and using new words in sentences to remember them. The low use of affective strategies might be due to the lack of opportunities to practise English with native speakers outside the classroom. Students in this population seem to experience a high level of language learning anxiety and, for this reason, they may not be willing to reflect on their emotional reaction to language learning. They reported that, despite efforts to relax when they were uncertain about speaking English, their fear of making a mistake often kept them from trying. Nonetheless, the most frequently used affective strategy was to encourage themselves to speak English even when they were afraid of making mistakes. These findings are consistent with those from previous studies (Oxford, 1990; Oh,

1992; Yang, 1993; Griffths & Parr, 1999; Han & Lin, 2000; Nisbet, 2002; Yu, 2003; Griffiths, 2003; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Al-Otaibi, 2004; Chen, 2005; Yang, 2007; Al-Buainain, 2010; Chang, 2011).

B. Gender

The second research question deals with the relationship between gender and the use of LLS. The strategies preferred by female students were almost the same as those preferred by male students. Therefore, the difference in overall strategy use between male and female students was not statistically significant. Means differences showed that females seemed to use LLS more frequently than males. Much research has shown that females tend to use more learning strategies than males (Politzer, 1983; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Green & Oxford, 1995; Lou, 1998; Cajkler & Thornton, 1999; Sheorey, 1999; Peng, 2001; Ching-Yi, Shu-Chen, & Yi-Nian, 2007; Mat The et al., 2009; Ghee et al., 2010; Anugkakul, 2011). The absence of a gender effect on strategy use was unexpected. It should be mentioned here that similar findings found in some of previous studies such asLou (1998) and Peng (2001).

C. Duration of Studying English

There were no significant differences among the subjects of this study according to duration of studying English. There was, however, a positive relationship between strategy use and study duration. In other words, those who spent many years studying the English language reported higher use of all strategy categories than those with fewer years of studying English. Research shows that it requires four to nine years to develop academic language skills and about two years to develop communicative skills in the target language. The years spent studying English is important because, in a formal education setting, the Saudi EFL learners communicate and interact with teachers and students who are more knowledgeable in English and are thus likely to influence their use of LLS. The longer the time spent in formal study of the English language, the more likely it is that the skills needed to succeed in using LLS will develop. Over time, the learner can evaluate his/her learning style to select the best possible LLS. Thus, the learner can maximise the use of LLS due to the communicative demands of the environment. This finding supports those from other studies (Cummins, 1981; Phillips, 1991; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Khalil, 2005; Magno, 2010).

V. CONCLUSION

This study explored the use of LLS among a group of Saudi English-major students at Aljouf University to investigate factors that have been found to affect strategy use, namely, gender and duration of studying English. The results showed that these students were low to moderate users of strategies. No significant differences by language performance in the respondents' use of all the strategy categories were noted. Moreover, the results revealed a high preference for cognitive and metacognitive strategies, which help students in planning and organising their language learning. Such findings are consistent with those from previous research (e.g. Shmais, 2003; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006; Al-Buainain, 2010; and Abu-Radwan, 2011. Further, the results indicated low preference to memory and affective strategies. Also, some previous results had found the same finding (Griffiths, 2003; Lan and Oxford, 2003; Al-Otaibi, 2004; Chen, 2005; Yang, 2007; Al-Buainain, 2010; Chang, 2011). In addition, the statistical tests showed no significant differences for gender which found the same in previous studies (i.e. Sheorey, 1999; Peng, 2001; Ching-Yi, Shu-Chen, and Yi-Nian, 2007; Mat The et al., 2009; Ghee et al., 2010; Anugkakul, 2011). There were no significant differences in overall strategy use according to duration of studying English (see, Lan & Oxford, 2003; Khalil, 2005; Magno, 2010).

A. Implications

The findings of this study have a number of implications for EFL instruction in the education system in Saudi Arabia.

1. The finding of a low to moderate mean of strategy use in this study indicates that the Saudi EFL students were not sufficiently aware of the available strategies and, hence, were not applying the full range of appropriate strategies. It is important, therefore, for teachers to raise students' awareness of the broad range of strategy options available to them. Greater strategy use may improve students' motivation and help them to improve their language learning. Language teachers should also consider how to enhance autonomous learning in students.

2. The results showed that female students and those who have spent a long time studying English reported using language learning strategies more than male students and students with less exposure to formal English study, although the differences were not significant. Therefore, language teachers should review their teaching methods, overall classroom style and individual preferences. Through evaluating their lesson plans, language teachers can determine whether these provide learners with opportunities to use a variety of learning style and strategies. Teachers also need to provide all students with opportunities to use LLS more frequently and to recognise the importance of LLS for all learners, regardless of their age, gender or duration of studying English. Learners are different in terms of ability and intelligence. Language teachers should recognize and make use of these differences to help language instruction.

3. Strategy training should be integrated into the language curriculum, as several researchers have recommended (see e.g.Oxford, 1990; Tyacke, 1991; Khalil, 2005; Abu Radwan, 2011). Learning plans and materials should incorporate a

variety of tasks and activities that target strategies considered to be critical for success in learning a second language. Chamot and O'Malley (1996) have developed instructional materials that include such instruction.

B. Limitations of the Study

Like all research, the current study has some limitations which do not, however, compromise the validity of the findings. These limitations, which suggest avenues for future research, were as follows:

1. Because the data in this study were based on self-report, it is possible that respondents to the questionnaire overestimated or underestimated the frequency with which they use certain strategies (Cohen, 1998).

2. The participants in this study were Saudi EFL students majoring in English. Hence undergraduate students in different majors were excluded. Furthermore, because participation was voluntary, findings could be affected by motivation bias.

3. Saudi students' use of learning strategies was assessed in relation to only two variables (gender and duration of studying English). Hence, the present study does not take account of all the possible factors that affect LLS usage.

4. There was no attempt to measure the effectiveness/success of strategy use, only the frequency of use. It is not possible, for example, to determine if male and female students who use the same strategy do so equally effectively.

C. Recommendations for Further Research

1. The literature review revealed a paucity of research on Arab EFL in general and Saudi EFL in particular. Further research, involving descriptive, experimental and cross-sectional studies, is therefore recommended to enhance understanding of Arab and Saudi EFL LLS use.

2. Such studies should investigate the LLS use of Saudi students at different ages and educational levels (i.e., intermediate, high school, university).

3. According to Griffiths (2007), teacher variables have not attracted the same degree of research attention as learner variables. It is important to investigate, for example, ESL/EFL teachers' perceptions and awareness of LLS.

4. The effect of training on LLS use and the effectiveness of LLS are important areas for future investigation.

5. Multiple-method approaches should be considered in future studies. The use of questionnaires could be supplemented with other research methods such as think-aloud protocols in conjunction with a specific learning task, written diaries, stimulated recall interviews and other techniques to provide richer and more sample-specific data.

6. More research on factors that affect strategy choice would be helpful. While the variables included in the current study may explain some of the discrepancies in reported strategy use among various group of learners, other factors might also play a role, including language proficiency, beliefs, social and cultural background, motivation, attitude, and personality.

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