

Language Learning Strategies Across Proficiency Levels Among EFL Pre-University Students

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Abstract

Language learning strategies (LLSs) play a critical role in language learning; thus, remarkable efforts have been made to underline the significance of LLS use as well as factors influencing learners' strategy choice. This research sought to investigate LLS use of Kurdish pre-university students learning English as a foreign language. Additionally, the researchers scrutinized the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and English proficiency. Acting in response to a call made by Oxford (1992) for additional replication of LLS research in different sociocultural contexts, this study was conducted in Kurdistan. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), individual background questionnaire and a version of English Sunrise Test were administered to 124 Kurdish pre-university students. The findings of the study indicated that Kurdish pre-university learners were equipped with strategies of language learning at a medium level. In addition, the study revealed that metacognitive and social strategies were most preferred, whereas learners turned out to be reluctant to make use of affective strategies. The findings of the present study are in agreement with other results of prior SILL studies, showing significance between LLSs and proficiency of English in favor of advanced learners. The more advanced the learners were in the language, the greater number of strategies they applied. Level of proficiency not only had significant influence on overall strategy use but the use of all six strategy categories. The results might be advantageous in pedagogy and curriculum design. Suggestions are provided for future research concerning issues that need to be further explored.

Keywords: language learning strategy, English proficiency level, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

The diversity of language learners in learning second language has encouraged researchers to conduct considerable research on language learning strategies (LLS) over the past three decades. One of the vital reasons for studying LLS is that these strategies supply crucial information about learners' accomplishments in language

learning. These strategies are also teachable; less proficient students can be equipped to a satisfactory level in language learning (Griffiths, 2004). Thus, research concerning language learning strategies examines the possibility of assisting students to become effective language learners by arming them with the learning strategies identified by descriptive studies as features of “good language learners” (Rubin, 1975; Setiyadi, Sukirlan & Mahpul, 2016). Strategies of language learning and language use have gained a great deal of attention in the scope of foreign language teaching and learning (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Cohen, 1990; Rubin & Thompson, 1994). These scholars confirm that linguists in many divergent contexts have been seeking ways to assist learners to become more outstanding and successful in their efforts to acquire and communicate in a second or foreign language.

Language learning strategies

In fact, the definition of language learning strategies has been subject to debate without reaching a consensus by researchers for decades. The nature of strategies and their specific function in the language learning process is still a controversial issue among researchers. Language learning strategies have been defined in various ways. Brown (2001) asserted that strategies are specific methods of approaching a difficulty or task “for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information” (p. 113). While (Oxford, 2011) maintains that language learning strategies are the conscious steps or behaviors put into practice by language learners to enhance and expedite the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information. This indicates that learning strategies can serve multiple functions.

Similarly, there has been some controversy and concerns regarding the classification of L2 strategies. It is of vital importance to identify the various types of learning strategies so as to understand how learning strategies can influence language acquisition. Although various classifications of language learning strategies have been given by many researchers, most of these attempts to classify strategies of language learning have come up with more or less the same categorizations without making any radical changes (Rivera-mills & Plonsky, 2007). The most frequently referenced classifications of L2 learning strategies in literature are classifications made by Rubin (1981), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990).

Oxford's classification has been chosen to underpin the present study. The reason behind its selection is that the aforementioned taxonomy is comprehensive, detailed and systematic (Vidal, 2002). Furthermore, it has been proven reliable and valid across different cultural groups. Moreover, it links both individual and groups of strategies with language skills, namely listening, reading, speaking and writing (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). These links are perceived of particular pertinence for pre-university settings. In addition, Oxford's (1990) detailed taxonomy is synthesis of all prominent taxonomies and has integrated all notable strategies into a single taxonomy (Vlčková et al., 2013). In addition to that, Oxford (1990) also devised a language learning strategy instrument survey built upon her taxonomy for assessing student's language learning strategy use

and their frequency brought into play by EFL/ ESL learners and this instrument is known as Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Research studies on language learning strategies have identified various factors which might potentially affect a student's choice of language learning strategies and the frequency of their use (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). As Ellis (1994) pointed out all factors influencing language learning strategies are classified under individual learner's differences and are either social or situational factors. Oxford (1990) reveals the nature of factors that influence the frequency and type of language learning strategy use among second language learners. She argued that the frequency and type of learning strategy use such as age, gender, degree of awareness of learning strategies, cultural background, mother language, motivation, purpose of learning, personality traits and stage of learning are subject to diversification. It is of vital importance to note that most of these learner variables, such as nationality, language proficiency, language teaching methods and field of specialization have been found to have a strong relationship with the choice of learning strategies (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). These studies were conducted for multiple purposes, to assist teachers in understanding individual differences in processes and achievement in language learning and so on.

It is obvious that proficiency is definitely the ultimate dream of all language learning, and the use of language learning strategies is consistently associated with language proficiency (Oxford 2001; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007). The relationship between the use of language learning strategies and language proficiency has been examined through various studies and many of these studies have shown a strong relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the level of language proficiency among both learners studying English as a foreign and second language throughout the world. Basically, frequency and patterns of strategy use have been proven to have significant relationships with English proficiency (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Park, 1997; Wharton, 2000; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; and Jelisaveta, 2013). However, some researchers have a different perception regarding this outcome as they have displayed this relationship to be rather weak and may not have been rigorously defined (Murray, 2007; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Vann & Abraham, 1990)

A number of researchers and educators, particularly in the second language context have been investigating as well as writing about learner strategies for some two decades; nonetheless it has been challenging to decide what learner strategies really are at an international level and with ultimate consensus (Macaro, 2001). By the same token, among the many factors that are commonly expected to influence the use of language learning strategies, language proficiency has not received due attention. Therefore, it is necessary to replicate studies concerning language learning strategy in unexplored different cultural contexts so as to prevent the risk of an ethnocentric bias concerning the good strategies of language learning (Wharton, 2000). To address the existing gap in literature, the present study seeks to investigate the types and

frequencies of language learning strategies used by Kurdish pre-university students in relation to their language proficiency.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions to be addressed are:

1. What types of language learning strategies do Kurdish pre-university students of English as a foreign language use across proficiency levels (elementary, intermediate, advanced)?
2. What are the differences and similarities in the use of language learning strategies across these proficiency levels?

METHODOLOGY

Design of the study

A quantitative research design was adopted for the study. This study is an attempt to outline the language learning strategy use of 124 Kurdish pre-university students learning English as a foreign language and to investigate how learners' English proficiency level influence the use of language learning strategies. For this reason, Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (version 7.0) was administered to measure learning strategy preferences. Moreover, English language proficiency was measured by National standardized test, known as Sunrise English Test run by Ministry of Education once every year. English proficiency level is the independent variable while language learning strategies are the dependent variable. The researchers made use of descriptive analysis to determine frequencies, mean, percentage and standard deviations of students' responses on the SILL.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 124 pre-university students (75 males and 49 females) in two high schools in the north of Erbil the capital city of Kurdistan. The participants, who were selected by using cluster sampling method, studied English as a foreign language and their ages ranged from 18 to 20 years. The students ranged in proficiency from elementary to advanced level of proficiency. There were 39 advanced, 45 intermediate and 40 elementary level students. English is taught as a foreign language and a compulsory subject. Accordingly, the students have neither language input nor language use outside the classroom. These EFL learners are all linked to the same English learning background. On top of that, they have been studying English for no less than eight years. The researcher also posed questions about demographic information for the sake of obtaining more clear-cut facts about the subjects.

Instrumentation

SILL was used to determine the frequency of use of language learning strategies. The SILL is composed of 50 items which is a 5 point Likert-scaled measurement arranged in this way: 1) never or almost never true of me; 2) generally not true of me; 3) somewhat

true of me; 4) generally true of me; and 5) always and almost always true of me. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire was translated from English into Kurdish to prevent any misunderstanding that might restrict students' comprehension of the survey items.

SILL remains the most extensively used classification scheme worldwide until present time. It is the only language learning instrument extensively checked for reliability and validity in many ways, for instance content validities of the six strategy types have been determined with agreement of .99 (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) while Cronbach's alpha measure of internal consistency estimates of reliability have been described as the most convenient, suitable and high for the total instrument. Likewise, findings from correlational studies have been reported recurrently in support of the criterion-related validity of the scale (Oxford, 1996); these have examined relationships between the 6-strategy set included in the taxonomy plus the verity of learner variables such as proficiency, gender, motivation, learning styles, and age (Tragant et al., 2013).

Furthermore, English language proficiency was measured by the national standardized test, known as Sunrise English Test run by Ministry of Education in Kurdistan once every year. The content of the test is made up of questions as means of assessing student's reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar and indirect speaking.

Ultimately, the researcher, based on scale score classified the participants into three proficiency levels: Advanced (scale scores on 85 to 100), Intermediate (scale scores on 65 to 84), and Elementary (scale scores on 64 or less). In addition, a self-reported background questionnaire was also used so as to elicit further information from the participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

The SILL and a self-reported background questionnaire were administrated to ESL students by the researcher during the summer of 2014 - 2015 academic years, right after the final examinations. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaires to the subjects, precise instructions were given by the researcher concerning how to complete the survey questionnaires. They were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers to the statements of the surveys and full confidentiality is guaranteed to all involved; they were also told that their responses would be used for research purposes only and their participation was voluntary and it would not affect their grades. The SILL was translated into Kurdish language in order to avoid any misunderstanding. Therefore, students were asked to fill out the questionnaire in Kurdish which took the participants 25 to 30 minutes to fill out.

The analysis of the data included descriptive and inferential statistics. Variables of the study are evaluated by using a statistical method such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. In the inferential section, two independent t-test, one-way ANOVA, and repeated measure ANOVA were applied to investigate the research

questions. The researcher also applied Scheffe post-hoc test to report where any significant differences came into existence.

RESULTS

The overall use of language learning strategies by the subjects is displayed in Table 1. It provides the mean and standard deviation of strategy use among all the participants. The average strategy use for overall strategy use ranged from high 3.58 to low 2.65. As for strategy categories, meta-cognitive strategies ranked the highest in use ($M = 3.58$) followed by social strategies ($M = 3.17$), compensation strategies ($M = 3.12$) and memory strategies ($M = 3.09$). The least preferred strategies were affective ($M = 2.65$) and cognitive strategies ($M = 2.90$).

The table shows the summary of the results for learner's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning which indicates that all six strategies were at medium level among respondents and only meta-cognitive showed a high level among respondents. However, the score for overall strategy use ($M = 3.1$) indicates that Kurdish pre-university students are medium strategy users.

Table 1. Summary of the overall use of strategies of language learning

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Level	Rank
Metacognitive	1.44	8.44	3.581	0.807	High	1
Social	1.33	4.67	3.179	0.772	Medium	2
Compensation	1.17	4.67	3.126	0.715	Medium	3
Memory	1.44	4.33	3.109	0.592	Medium	4
Cognitive	1	5.43	2.908	0.734	Medium	5
Affective	1.17	4.17	2.656	0.673	Medium	6

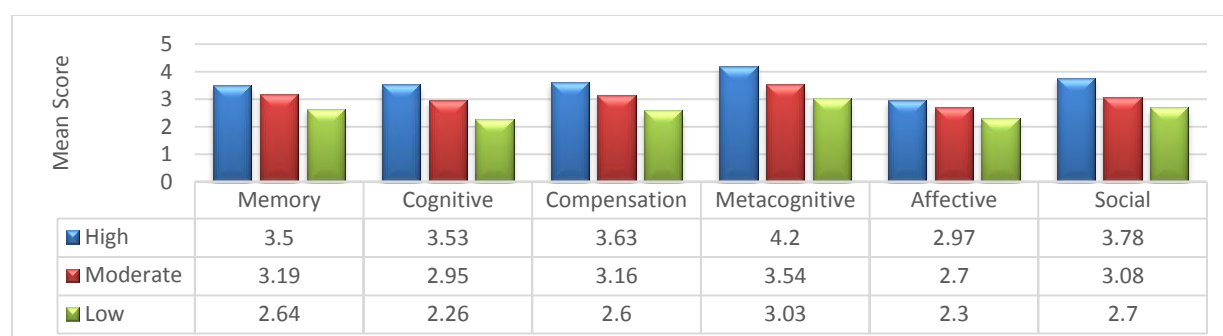
Use of strategy by English proficiency level

When participants were grouped by Sunrise English Test (Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced Level), the results of pairwise comparison of strategy use by proficiency level as displayed in Table 2, show that the highest mean of language learning strategies belonged to respondents with higher level of proficiency based on Sunrise English Test; this was significantly more than the other groups. The advanced learners reported higher mean scores in all of the six strategy categories than intermediate and elementary proficiency learners. In other words, learners of advanced levels used all types of strategies more frequently than those with intermediate and elementary levels of proficiency. This group also reported the most frequent use of metacognitive strategies. Respondents with intermediate level of proficiency also significantly had higher language learning strategies than respondents at the elementary level of proficiency. The most preferred strategy category for all levels (advanced, intermediate and elementary) were metacognitive strategies ($M = 4.2$, $M = 3.54$ and $M = 3.03$, respectively) whereas, affective strategies were the least preferred strategies for all groups.

Table 2. Results of Post-Hoc tests for mean comparison among groups

Variables	85-100 Advanced	65-84 Intermediate	less than 65 Elementary
Memory	3.5±0.41a	3.19±0.44b	2.64±0.58c
Cognitive	3.53±0.4a	2.95±0.6b	2.26±0.56c
Compensation	3.63±0.55a	3.16±0.6b	2.6±0.6c
Metacognitive	4.2±0.79a	3.54±0.56b	3.03±0.64c
Affective	2.97±0.62a	2.7±0.6a	2.3±0.64c
Social	3.78±0.52a	3.08±0.66b	2.7±0.72c

Means with same letter in each row are not significantly different at 0.05 level

**Figure 1.** Mean difference of language learning strategies according to English proficiency level**Table 3.** Preference of language learning strategies by Kurdish EFL learners

Strategy Category	Item	Mean	Rank
High usage (M = 3.5 or above)			
Met	I think about my progress in learning English.	3.855	1
Met	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	3.839	2
Cog	I say or write new English words several times.	3.774	3
Com	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	3.645	4
Met	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	3.645	5
Met	I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	3.532	6
Met	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	3.508	7
Com	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	3.500	8
Medium usage (M = 2.5 -3.4)			
Met	I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	3.484	9
Met	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	3.411	10
Met	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	3.395	11
Soc	I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk or write.	3.395	12
Aff	I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	3.387	13
Mem	I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	3.371	14

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Soc	I ask for help from English speakers.	3.371	15
Mem	I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	3.363	16
Mem	I remember new English words by rote.	3.323	17
Soc	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	3.307	18
Cog	I try to talk like native English speakers.	3.274	19
Mem	I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	3.234	20
Met	I look for people I can talk to in English.	3.234	21
Mem	I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	3.218	22
Cog	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	3.210	23
Mem	I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	3.153	24
Com	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	3.145	25
Cog	I use the English words I know in different ways.	3.137	26
Mem	I review English lessons often.	3.113	27
Soc	I practice English with other students.	3.081	28
Aff	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	3.073	29
Soc	I ask questions in English.	3.032	30
Cog	I practice the sounds of English.	3.000	31
Com	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	2.960	32
Cog	I read for pleasure in English.	2.944	33
Soc	I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	2.887	34
Cog	I first skim an English passage (read the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	2.847	35
Cog	I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	2.847	36
Com	I read English without looking up every new word.	2.823	37
Mem	I use flashcards to remember new English words.	2.798	38
Cog	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	2.790	39
Com	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	2.686	40
Cog	I try not to translate word-for-word.	2.677	41
Aff	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	2.677	42
Cog	I start conversations in English.	2.629	43
Cog	I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	2.629	44
Cog	I try to find patterns in English.	2.540	45
Aff	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	2.508	46
Low usage (M = 2.4 or below)			
Mem	I use rhymes to remember new English words.	2.411	47
Cog	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	2.411	48
Aff	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	2.226	49
Aff	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	2.065	50

Mem (Memory strategies), Cog (Cognitive strategies), Com (Compensation strategies), Met (Metacognitive strategies), Aff (Affective strategies), Soc (Social strategies).

Relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency levels

In this section, language learning strategies were categorized to low, medium and high levels. Mean values 1-2.4 (low), 2.5-3.4 (medium); and 3.5-5 (high) levels and chi square test was applied to evaluate the relationship between proficiency and type of language learning strategies. Table 4 reveals that there was significant relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency.

Table 4. Relationship between language proficiency and strategy use

Strategies	English Language Proficiency				χ^2	P value
	Proficiency rank	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced		
Memory	Elementary	0(0)	1(7.7)	12(92.3)	40.890	<0.001
	Intermediate	20(24.4)	37(45.1)	25(30.5)		
	Advanced	19(65.5)	7(24.1)	3(10.3)		
Cognitive	Elementary	0(0)	8(28.6)	20(71.4)	46.966	<0.001
	Intermediate	22(29.7)	33(44.6)	19(25.7)		
	Advanced	17(77.3)	4(18.2)	1(4.5)		
Compensation	Elementary	1(5)	6(30)	13(65)	44.681	<0.001
	Intermediate	13(19.1)	28(41.2)	27(39.7)		
	Advanced	25(69.4)	11(30.6)	0(0)		
Metacognitive	Elementary	0(0)	1(14.3)	6(85.7)	42.924	<0.001
	Intermediate	2(4.8)	16(38.1)	24(57.1)		
	Advanced	37(49.3)	28(37.3)	10(13.3)		
Affective	Elementary	6(13)	14(30.4)	26(56.5)	22.357	<0.001
	Intermediate	28(41.2)	27(39.7)	13(19.1)		
	Advanced	5(50)	4(40)	1(10)		
Social	Elementary	0(0)	6(33.3)	12(66.7)	36.004	<0.001
	Intermediate	12(19.4)	27(43.5)	23(37.1)		
	Advanced	27(61.4)	12(27.3)	5(11.4)		

The results of the study showed the five most frequently used strategies by Kurdish pre-university learners. The first one was the metacognitive strategy item 38 "I think about my progress in learning English." ($M = 3.8$) followed by item 32 "I pay attention when someone is speaking English." ($M = 3.83$) which is also a metacognitive item. The cognitive strategy item 10 "I say or write new English words several times." ($M = 3.77$) ranked third and compensation strategy item 29 "If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing." ($M = 3.64$), metacognitive strategy item 33 "I try to find out how to be a better learner of English." ($M = 3.64$) were among the five most preferable strategies. On the other hand, the five least learning strategies used by Kurdish EFL learners included the affective strategy item 43 "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary." ($M = 2.06$), item 44 "I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English." ($M = 2.22$), the cognitive strategy item 17 "I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English." ($M = 2.41$), memory strategy item 5 "I use rhymes to remember new English words." ($M = 2.41$) and the affective strategy item 42 "I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English." ($M = 2.50$).

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to investigate if language proficiency influences the use of language learning strategies among pre-university EFL learners and to what extent they make use of strategies of language learning. Earlier research (Green & Oxford, 1995; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Yilmaz, C. 2010 and Salahshour & Sharifi, 2013) has revealed that advanced learners used language learning strategies more intensively than elementary learners.

The results obtained from this study not only confirm a positive relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency level but also yield insights into language learning strategy use in the Kurdish context. The research also reported that advanced proficiency learners surpassed the elementary and intermediate learners in using language learning strategies. In fact, Kurdish advanced learners tend to use more and a greater motley collection of strategies than both intermediate and elementary learners. It is of worth importance to note that advanced learners outperformed not in one or some but in the use of all six strategy categories and this supports Lee (2001) who found similar results. Moreover, students of intermediate proficiency did better than elementary learners in the use of the entire strategy categories; significant differences were found between all groups of proficiency.

The present study has also revealed that EFL Kurdish pre-university learners' language learning strategy use, measured by the SILL, ranges from high (3.58) to medium (M = 2.65) and the overall was a medium strategy use. These outcomes of the study are in line with results of some earlier exemplary studies conducted among Asian EFL learners (Nguyen, N., & Godwyll, F. 2010; Hong-nam & Leavell, 2006; Huang, 2014; and Salahshour & Sharifi, 2013). The feasible explanation for medium strategy use rather than high among Kurdish EFL learners, like many EFL learners, could be limited exposure to English speaking situations. On the other hand, ESL learners who are acquiring a language in an environment where the language is the key vehicle of daily survival and communication, regularly resort to use more learning strategies than do learners of foreign languages, whose environment in which they are learning a language may not provide viable linguistic resources for communication because that language is not the everyday means of communication. In this regard, Kurdish learners may not have sufficient opportunities to directly and positively interact with English-speaking cultures and native speakers of English.

Furthermore, advanced learners found to make use of metacognitive and social strategies most and this is what Magogwe and Oliver (2007) and Salahshour and Sharifi (2013) also reported in their studies. This finding also verifies Oxford's (1990) assertion that metacognitive strategies are crucial components of successful language learning. Likewise, learners of elementary level also preferred to use the aforementioned strategy categories most. However, students of intermediate level were in favor of using metacognitive and memory strategies. There were significant mean differences in all six categories and all levels of proficiency. Additionally, all of the subjects declared to use affective strategies least and similar results have been reported by Hong-nam and

Leavell (2006) and Nguyen and Godwyll (2010). However several studies have revealed that Asian students use memory strategies more than any other strategies due to either style or traditional approach of teaching.

When it comes to the six individual strategies, the findings of the current work indicated that Kurdish pre-university students use metacognitive and social strategies more frequently than the other categories of strategy. Metacognitive strategy ranked top ($M = 3.58$) followed immediately by social strategy ($M = 3.17$), compensation strategy ($M = 3.12$) and memory strategy ($M = 3.09$). Kurdish EFL learners were found to employ metacognitive strategies most frequently among any other strategy groups. Metacognitive strategies require thinking about the learning process and assessing how well one has learned (Oxford, 2001). They assist students to determine not only what they should learn but also how they overcome their struggles with learning English language. This result of the study is consistent with the findings of research on Korean, Iranian, Chinese and international subjects as reported by Oh (1996), Salahshour and Sharifi (2013) and Nguyen and Godwyll (2010). The popularity of metacognitive strategies among Kurdish learners can be contributed to their clearly defined aims as well as having the potential to analyze their progress and the directions they have undertaken for the future of their learning.

On the other hand, social strategies were the second most frequently used strategies despite the fact that Kurdish learners are in an EFL context. Social strategies are very crucial strategic tools to facilitate interaction which involve asking questions and asking for clarification and help. It is supposed that the students may have attempted to practice and communicate in English during classroom time although opportunities to do so may have been few. Moreover, Yang (1999) claimed that the priority of social strategy use might be attributable to the some influential factors like learners' exposure to social media and networking technologies, which empower learners to be directly engaged in foreign cultures and offers them more English input. Besides, authentic English materials including English TV, Internet, and English newspaper are all accessible very easily to Kurdish students. Thus, students now have more occasions to use social strategies not only in but also out of classroom context.

With regard to affective strategies, vast majority of the participants responded to affective strategies reluctantly. Similarly, some of the earlier research found affective strategies either as least or second least desirable strategies (Yilmaz, 2010 ; Nguyen & Godwyll, 2010; Yang, 2010 and Huang, 2014). EFL Kurdish learners are reluctant to display their opinions or emotions and this can be ascribed to a cultural influence and their language learning behaviors as highlighted by Rao (2006) that Asian students, especially in Japan and Korea, are rather shy and quiet in English classrooms, being reticent about what they have thought and learned. According to Yang (2010) the traditional English curriculum in Korea does not emphasize on teaching English learners how to best handle their negative emotions when coming across difficulties in learning the target language. The same thing is applicable when it comes to the environment of Kurdish learners.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides an understanding and evidence of strategy use related to Kurdish students and the effect of language proficiency on these learners' language learning strategy use. It was revealed that Kurdish pre-university learners employed all six language learning strategies at a medium level and metacognitive and social strategies were most preferable than any other strategies; however, they were not in favor of using affective strategies. Such preferences have been reported by previous studies (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Nguyen & Godwyll, 2010). Neither high nor low ranges of strategy use were reported by learners for any of the six strategy categories, which means Kurdish learners adopted an overall use of the entire six categories of strategies at a moderate level. The study found a strong relationship between language learning strategies and learners' language proficiency. The result confirmed earlier literature which indicated that the more advanced the learners were in the language, the greater number of strategies they applied. The most striking result that emerged from the data was that proficiency level had significantly influenced the overall strategy use. This result provides confirmatory evidence that language proficiency affects the usage of LLSs. However, this overwhelming finding differs from most of the SILL studies which revealed that proficiency level generated a statistically significant difference in the use of all six categories. The participants in this study, in contrast to many Asian learners, tended to employ communicative strategies most mainly metacognitive and social strategies. Among the plausible explanations for these findings is that the accessibility of media and internet plays an important role in helping learners to practice their language and being in touch with native speakers.

In relation to the findings of the current study, many questions have emerged in need of further investigation. First, the current study investigated the effect on a single factor which was proficiency; it would be interesting to assess the effects of other factors on LLS use such as learning styles, motivation, learning beliefs, etc. Besides that, this study was an investigation of overall strategies of language learning rather than looking at discrete strategies. Further research might also explore strategy use in learning the different language skills, reading, listening, writing and speaking, which would be a great help in understanding about how best different language skills are learnt by Kurdistan learners. Finally, the data on learners' learning strategy use for this study was collected quantitatively through a self-reported questionnaire and Oxford's (1990) SILL. It is recommended that further research be undertaken qualitatively to prevent any discrepancies brought about by data collection techniques. The current work might have a vivid and more comprehensible representation of strategy use by the participants had the researcher collected the data through a survey together with interviews and observations.

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