Research Article

The Use of SILL Questionnaire on Understanding the Language Learning Strategies: Language Learning Strategy Use Profiles

Hsuan Yu Chen

University of Essex

Abstract

This study explores the language learning strategy (LLS) use of three advanced English learners at the University of Essex, using Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and follow-up interviews. It examines the frequency and reasons behind the use of six LLS categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Each participant showed a distinct pattern of strategy use shaped by personal and motivational factors. Participant A frequently used social strategies but struggled with affective strategies due to perfectionism. Participant B favored social and compensation strategies but used memory strategies less, influenced by lower motivation. Participant C most often used compensation strategies and least used affective strategies, reflecting a positive emotional approach and risk-taking attitude. The findings align with research showing that successful learners use a wide range of strategies, especially metacognitive and social ones. The study highlights the value of understanding individual LLS profiles to tailor strategy instruction and recommends activities to strengthen less-used strategies. Overall, recognizing and supporting diverse strategy use can improve learners' motivation, self-regulation, and language proficiency, enhancing the effectiveness of language learning.

The Use of SILL Questionnaire on Understanding the Language Learning Strategies: Language Learning Strategy Use Profiles

Introduction

Language learning strategies (LLS) plays a crucial role in language learning journey as they serve as tools for active, self-directed engagement, which is vital for developing communicative competence (Oxford, 1990). Using the appropriate LLS at right time leads to enhanced language proficiency and increased self-confidence (Oxford, 1990). In other words, LLS means how learners think and act to achieve their learning goals throughout the learning process. Moreover, various factors influence the choice of LLS, including age, sex, nationality, ethnicity, personality, learning style, teacher expectations, motivation level, and purpose of learning the language (Oxford, 1990). For instance, older learners may employ different strategies compared to younger learners, while females often employing a wider or different range of strategies than males, according to studies. In line with these factors, a proficient language learner can flexibly select strategies based on their interests, motivations, perceptions of task difficulty, emotional states, and energy levels (Oxford and Amerstorfer, 2019). Therefore, understanding learners' LLS provides invaluable insights for teachers to assist students in better learning experience and becoming a more successful learner (Mega *et al.,* 2019). In this article, I employed a 50-item Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire and conducted follow-up interviews to explore the most and least frequently used LLS groups of the participants (*n*=3). Subsequently, I introduce the taxonomy of LLS by Oxford (1990) and analyze the questionnaire results and interview findings to demonstrate how participants use LLS in their English learning.

Literature Review

The concept of the taxonomy of LLS, introduced by Oxford in 1990, has a long history and is widely recognized among practitioners. It has been applied not only in second language acquisition (SLA) research but also in the emerging field of multilingualism and third language acquisition (TLA, Dmitrenko, 2017). In her book, *"Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know"* (Oxford, 1990), LLS are divided into two main classes, namely, direct and indirect. Direct strategies refer to strategies involving the target language directly. Under this class, there are three subdivisions. Memory strategies involve helping learners to store and retrieve information, such as using imagery or implementing physical responses. Cognitive strategies involve different ways to process and produce target language knowledge, such as reasoning deductively or taking notes. Compensation strategies, such as guessing or finding synonyms, are employed when overcoming gaps in knowledge. On the other hand, indirect strategies support and manage learning without directly involving the target language. Under this class, there are also three subdivisions. Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their cognition through centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating their own learning. Affective strategies enable learners to regulate factors that influence learning, such as emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values. Social strategies let students learn through interacting with others. Each group provides mutual support and influence on each other. It is vital to note that strategies are used by students at all instructional and proficiency levels (Oxford, 1993).

The Use of SILL Questionnaire on Understanding the Language Learning Strategies: Language Learning Strategy Use Profiles

From both teacher and learner perspectives, understanding when to use what kind of strategies makes learning more effective and contributes to becoming a "successful" learner. According to previous literature, successful learners tend to employ all six categories of strategies more than unsuccessful ones (Dmitrenko, 2017; Mega *et al.,* 2019; Suwarno and Ramasari, 2023). Furthermore, according to Mega *et al.* (2019), statistical analysis indicated that highly successful students frequently employed metacognitive strategies, whereas less successful students utilized cognitive strategies to a moderate degree. They also found that successful students excel in planning clear learning goals, controlling, reviewing, and evaluating their language learning journeys, while unsuccessful learners emphasize thinking, memorizing, summarizing, and repeating information more. In addition, based on research by Oxford and Crookall (1989, as cited in Kostic-Bobanovic and Ambrosi-Randic, 2008), they figured that compared to less proficient learners, proficient learners typically employ strategies in a manner that is more closely aligned with the tasks, tailored to their learning style, and well-structured.

Recent studies using SILL found metacognitive strategies to be the most frequently used among EFL students. Suwarno and Ramasari (2023) reported metacognitive strategies dominated in public speaking classes, while Alfarisy (2022) found successful Indonesian students mainly used metacognitive strategies (72.7%) and affective strategies least (56.8%), reflecting learners' strategic awareness in language learning.

Oxford (1990) developed the widely recognized SILL questionnaire to specifically investigate learners' language learning strategies. After extensive validation and reliability testing, it has been applied in studies of multilinguals (Dmitrenko, 2017). This research uses the SILL to explore strategy use among adult learners.

Participants

The study included three female participants, designated as Participant A, B, and C, each with distinct academic and professional backgrounds. All participants were enrolled at the University of Essex (UoE) and had achieved an IELTS band score of 7.0. Participant A, a 22-year-old Taiwanese student, is pursuing a master's degree in Literature and Creative Writing. Her native language is Chinese, her second language is English, and she is currently learning Spanish at UoE. Participant B, a 27-year-old Mexican student, is pursuing a master's degree in Financial Economics. Spanish is her native language, English is her second language, and she is currently learning German at UoE. Participant C, a 21-year-old Taiwanese student who is also pursuing a master's degree in TESOL, is outside of the module. Her native language is Chinese, her second language is English, and she is currently learning Spanish at UoE.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to provide a more comprehensive understanding of learners' English learning strategies. Two instruments were employed: a questionnaire and a follow-up semi-structured interview. The quantitative component utilized the SILL Version 7.0 for ESL/EFL learners, developed by Oxford (1989). The SILL questionnaire has been widely used by researchers as part of a research tool in the success of language learning (Suwarno and Ramasari, 2023). Due to its well-established validity and reliability, and its widespread use in second language research, the SILL was deemed an appropriate and justified tool for examining learner strategy profiles (Alfarisy, 2022). The questionnaire was distributed in PDF format via online communication software. Participants' responses were transferred to Microsoft Excel and analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean, to identify patterns of strategy use.

To further explore the reasons behind learners' frequent or infrequent use of specific strategies, a qualitative online semi-structured interviews was implemented. These interviews aimed to contextualize the questionnaire data and gain insights into participants' perceptions and rationales for strategy use. Interviews were conducted via Google Meet and lasted approximately 10 minutes per participant. Questions were tailored based on participants' most and least frequently used strategies, as identified from their SILL responses:

For the most frequently used strategies:
1. What aspects of these strategies do you find particularly effective in your language learning journey?
2. Have you noticed any reasons behind your frequent use of these strategies?
3. (If applicable) What makes you to heavily rely on [specific strategy] in your language learning process?

For the least frequently used strategies:
1. (If applicable) Why do you rarely use [specific strategy] in your learning process?
2. Are there any challenges or difficulties when implementing [specific strategy] in your learning routine?
3. Have you ever tried to incorporate [specific strategy] into your language learning practice, and if not, what factors have stopped you from doing so?

These questions aimed to provide insights into the participants' perspectives and the underlying thought processes behind their strategic choices..

The Use of SILL Questionnaire on Understanding the Language Learning Strategies: Language Learning Strategy Use Profiles

Results and Discussion

According to the framework outlined by Oxford (1990), there are three levels of frequency in which students use LLS. These levels are determined by averaging the scores students assign to each item on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. The categories are as follows:

1. Highly used: the mean score (*M*) falls between 3.5 to 5.0.
2. Medium used: M falls between 2.5 to 3.4.
3. Low used: M is smaller than 2.4.

From Table 1 below, participant A most frequently employs social strategies, while affective strategies are used the least. She is a highly user of all six of LLS (*M*=3.7). For her, she is conscious of the strategies she uses. Due to her personality, whenever she faces challenges, she never gives up until she resolves them. or instance, she seeks external resources when she finds that a module does not meet her learning needs, and she consults online sources such as the internet or Google for solutions. This contributes to her higher score in social strategies. Additionally, we discussed the lower use of affective strategies. For her, managing her emotions is a big deal. Due to her perfectionist personality, she diligently monitors and corrects her mistakes, as it shows in her high scores in metacognitive strategies. However, her anxiety at times leads her to neglect basic needs such as eating and sleeping, significantly impacting her long-term well-being. Nevertheless, she strives to process these emotions and maintain focus on her learning tasks. Overall, she is a proficient language strategies user. To enhance her language learning effectiveness, adopting the activity "Taking your emotional temperature" by Oxford (1990, p. 144) could be beneficial. First, listening to the body is the key, paying attention to emotion signals, whether they are negative or positive. Second, using a checklist in discovering feelings, attitudes, or motivations toward the general language journey or a specific task. Third, keeping a language learning diary helps in tracking events and feelings. Lastly, discussing your feelings with someone to express and discover the emotions about language learning journey.

Table 1. LLS Results from Participant A.

Ranks	Strategies	Mean
1	Social	4.5 (high)
2	Metacognitive	4.3(high)
3	Cognitive	3.7 (high)
4	Compensation	3.5 (high)
5	Memory	3.4 (medium)
6	Affective	3.3 (medium)

The Use of SILL Questionnaire on Understanding the Language Learning Strategies: Language Learning Strategy Use Profiles

From Table 2 below, participant B most frequently employs social and compensation strategies, while memory strategies are used the least. She is a highly user of all six of LLS (M=3.6). For her, she is conscious of the strategies she uses, and she found that "creating and using new words in context" or "guessing meaning from context" were especially beneficial for her learning. She felt that these strategies improved both her input and output skills compared to solely watching videos. This algins with the results where she achieved higher scores in social and compensation strategies. Additionally, we discussed the lower use of memory strategies. As a business student, her focus is not on language learning, resulting in lower motivation. Although she understands memory strategies, she lacks the motivation to apply them when memorizing new vocabulary. Overall, she is a proficient language strategies user. To enhance her language learning effectiveness, adopting the activity "Creating mental linkages" by Oxford (1990, p. 40) could be beneficial. First, grouping the language materials into meaningful units based on categories like topics, practical function, antonyms, synonyms, or parts of speech. Second, associating the concept that is already learned in the memory and meaningful to the learners, such as using a semantic map. For instance, connecting words like school-book-student-teacher or school-desk-tree-forest. Third, placing new words into a meaningful sentence, conversation, or a story aid in remembering them. Lastly, find a learning buddy to monitor and discuss her learning.

Table 2. LLS Results from Participant B.

Ranks	Strategies	Mean
1	Social	4 (high)
1	Compensation	4 (high)
3	Metacognitive	3.8 (high)
4	Cognitive	3.5 (high)
5	Affective	3.5 (medium)
6	Memory	3 (medium)

From Table 3 below, participant C most frequently employs compensation strategies, while affective strategies are used the least. She is a medium user of all six of LLS (M=3.2). Given her academic background in education, she recognizes the significance of employing appropriate strategies for effective learning. During our interview, she mentioned having experimented with nearly all the strategies listed in the questionnaire. Therefore, she found some effective while others. For example, she knows that reading for pleasure isn't a viable strategy for her, as she lacks

interest in reading. Additionally, we specifically addressed her lower use of memory strategies. She struggled with part E (affective) of the form, as she rarely experiences negative emotions when learning English. According to the 50-item questionnaire, half of the questions in part E are related to negative emotions. However, she does award herself as positive reinforcement. This may explain why compensation skills also are her most frequently employed strategies, as she is not afraid of making mistakes and willing to taking risks. Overall, while the questionnaire results may not indicate her as a highly strategic user, I would argue that she is a proficient strategies user, as she could provide reasons for not using certain strategies. Yet, to enhance her language learning effectiveness, focusing on her second-to-last strategy by adopting some aspects of the activity "Practicing" by Oxford (1990, p. 40) could be beneficial. First, recognizing and using formula and pattern. Being aware of the routines formulas (e,g. Cheers) or unanalyzed patterns (e.g. I argued that _____). Second, recombining them into longer sentences. Finally, practicing them in natural or realistic settings, such as writing assignments or chatting with friends.

Table 3. LLS Results from Participant C.

Ranks	Strategies	Mean
1	Compensation	3.6 (high)
2	Metacognitive	3.5 (high)
2	Memory	3.5 (high)
4	Social	3.3 (medium)
5	Cognitive	3.2 (medium)
6	Affective	2.3 (low)

Conclusion

This study investigates the LLS utilization of three participants (A, B, and C) to understand their approaches and reasons to English learning. To understand further, I employed SILL questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Participant A exhibited a higher use of social, and lower use of affective strategies. She is good at seeking external resources when encountering difficulties, however managing emotions is relatively hard for her. Therefore, applying the activity "taking your emotional temperature" is recommended. Participant B demonstrated a higher use of social and compensation, and lower use of memory strategies. She knows which strategies suit her, but lower motivation results in reduced efficiency when memorizing words. Therefore, applying the activity "creating mental linkages" and find a learning buddy is recommended. Participant C displayed a higher use of compensation, and lower use of affective strategies. Due to her learning experience, addressing on the second-to-last strategies would be

better. Therefore, applying some parts of the activity "practicing" is recommended. The findings are consistent with recent research by Suwarno and Ramasari (2023) and Alfarisy (2022), both of which reported that metacognitive strategies were a relatively higher use than other strategy types. Overall, they are all proficient language strategies user, and they are aware of their strategies used. By knowing the utilization of LLS, educators and learners can facilitate more effective language learning journeys.

References

Al-Buainain, H. (2010) 'Language Learning Strategies Employed by English Majors at Qatar University: Questions and Queries', *Asiatic*, *4*(2), pp. 92–120. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.31436/asiatic.v4i2.525

Alfarisy, F. (2022) 'The use of SILL Oxford on understanding the speaking learning strategies', *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, *5*(6), pp. 91–99. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2022.5.6.11

Dmitrenko, V. (2017) 'Language learning strategies of multilingual adults learning additional languages', *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *14*(1), pp. 6–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2017.1258978

Kostic-Bobanovic, M. and Ambrosi-Randic, N. (2008) 'Languages Learning Strategies in Different English As a Foreign Language Education Levels', *Društvena Istraživanja*, *17*(93–94), pp. 281–300. https://www.croris.hr/crosbi/publikacija/prilog-casopis/144766

Mega, D.H., Santihastuti, A. and Wahjuningsih, E. (2019) 'The learning strategies used by EFL students in learning English', *IJEE (Indonesian Journal of English Education)*, *6*(1), pp. 10–20. http://doi.org/10.15408/ijee.v6i1.12111

Oxford, R.L. (1990) *Language learning strategies: what every teacher should know*. Heinle & Heinle.

Oxford, R.L. and Amerstorfer, C.M. (2019) *Language learning strategies and individual learner characteristics: situating strategy use in diverse contexts*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350005075

Suwarno, W.J. and Ramasari, M. (2023) 'An analysis of students' strategies in public speaking subject by using strategy inventory for language learning (SILL)', *ELite Journal: International Journal of Education, Language and Literature*, *3*(2), pp. 96–108. https://doi.org/10.26740/elitejournal.v3n2.p96-108

Copyright Statement