

An Investigation of Language Learning Strategy Use in an ESP Context: Hotel Management Students in Focus

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to compare the language learning strategy use between high achievers and low achievers of Hotel Management students who were taking an ESP course (Hotel English) and develop some conclusion for teachers teaching English language in general teaching Hotel English in particular. An ESP proficiency test was given to the participants. Based on their proficiency test scores, participants were assigned into two groups. One was a group of high achievers, and the other was a group of low achievers. The whole students' results reveal that the metacognitive strategies were used more frequently than other strategies. Compensation strategies were the second highly used strategies followed by Social strategies. Cognitive strategies and Memory strategies are the fourth and the fifth types of strategies used by students respectively. Although both high and low achievers reported equal amount of time studying English per week when they were at school, high achievers spent their time more wisely (strategically) by being more active in producing language, and their practice distributed over multiple times monitoring their performance. Implications about quality of strategy use in learning English in general, and ESP in particular have been forwarded.

Key words: language learning strategy, high and low achievers, English for specific purposes (ESP), speaking proficiency

1. Introduction

English is an important lingua franca in today's world that the knowledge of English is desirable in almost every business sector especially where communication is practised among people from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Hotel Management trainees are the ones who are due to work for the hotel and tourism industry in the future. Learning English is, therefore an

indispensable part of these trainees in general learning speaking skills in particular, for they need to be well equipped with the language for communication in their future careers. Nowadays, how to communicate effectively in Foreign Language Learning becomes much more important than reading and writing for these students. As a result, language learning strategies have turned into a crucial topic for all foreign language learners and teachers (Oxford, 1990). The language learning strategies have a profound effect on the achievement of the course. Thus, this study attempted to explore the English language learning strategies of these trainees, putting emphasis on high and low achievers' ways of using strategies.

1.1. Background

Ethiopian government proclaims English language to be taught as a subject at elementary level and as a medium of instruction for secondary and higher education for several years (FDRE, 1994). All Ethiopian governmental universities give English language as a common course (Communicative English Skills and Basic Writing Skills / Sophomore English) or they are giving English for Academic Purpose (EAP) to get better the students' academic achievement or to the improvement of students' communicative and academic skills. However, this does not bring the students' English language communication skills to the level expected (Anto, Coenders and Voogt, 2012). In order to alleviate this problem, English for Specific Purpose (ESP) has been taught for selected departments in these universities.

Some departments like Hotel Management, Tourism Management, Business Education, and Law, which need to revamp English for occupational purpose (EOP), or English for specific purpose (ESP) designed courses which suit the needs of their students and local employers of their graduates.

Providing ESP courses recognizes the correlation between what students learn in class and success in their future professions. The learners' proficiency, however, always remains poor and the effectiveness of English language teaching remains always questionable, despite the efforts being undertaken by the Ethiopian government and concerned institutions (Anto, Coenders and Voogt, 2012).

If we take hotel management department, for example, it needs its students to be good at speaking in English because the hospitality industry has a special need for employees who can communicate effectively with the English-speaking clientele that visit their hotels and resorts and use services and activities they offer, including restaurants and conferences (Bouzidi, 2009). Therefore, much emphasis should be given to the industry's needs because hospitality industry contributes immensely to the nation's economic development in many ways, in addition to the immediately apparent prospects of creating jobs and boosting overall income of the country, Ethiopia. The industry fosters government revenues from sales taxes and duties and often boosts property-tax receipts. It also brings in foreign exchange and stimulates development of basic infrastructure.

In the current world, the rapid development of social economy, culture, science and technology have been all the more seeing the traditional beliefs and modes fail to adapt to the modern educational requirements. Through this study, we can better update the teachers' educational beliefs and constantly learn new teaching methods and new knowledge to meet the needs of educational reforms. Furthermore, we hold that quality is the absolute principle in the educational career. Regrettably a lot of problems leading to poor educational quality come down to the inefficient learning methods rather than teaching methods. Hence, if we want to improve the students' English language proficiency, language learning strategies should be incorporated in large scales.

Thus the researcher wanted to conduct a research at Hawassa University to identify what language learning strategies first year Hotel Management students use while they are taking Hotel English course in general speaking English in particular and to investigate the extent to which the strategies influence the learners' language achievement. I was inspired, moreover, to conduct a research on this area because in Ethiopia the hotel industry highly demands employees who are good at English language communication.

Many definitions have presented about Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) in different ways. One of the earliest researchers in this field, Rubin (1975, p.43) provides a very broad definition of learning strategies as “the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge”. When O'Malley *et al* (1985) came to conduct their research, they used the

definition of learning strategies as being “operations or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information” (p.23).

According to Oxford’s (1990) broad definition, the word "Strategy" is driven from the ancient Greek term *strategia*, which refers to generalship or the art of war. In a more specific sense, strategy entails the optimal management of troops, ships or aircraft in a planned campaign. "Tactics" is different but related to strategies, which are tools to achieve the success of strategies. Moreover, the two expressions share some basic concepts: planning, competition, conscious manipulation and movement toward a goal (Oxford, 1990a, p. 8).

If there has not been common agreement on the definition of learning strategies, the same can be said of their categorization and classification. Different researchers classified language learning strategies in different ways. These classifications, however, do not have that much considerable difference. They developed their own taxonomies of strategies according to their research findings by applying different methods of data collection. For that reason, it might not be appropriate to compare them and assess their influence on teaching and learning process. . For example, Rubin (1975) classifies learning strategies according to processes which contribute either directly or indirectly to language learning. O'Malley *et al.* (1985) divided language learning strategies into three main categories. This classification is presented again by O'Malley *et al* (1985) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990).

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A. Metacognitive Strategies: O'Malley *et al.* (1985) state that metacognitive is an expression to indicate an executive function, strategies which involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, observing of one’s production or comprehension, correcting your own mistakes, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Based on O’Malley’s classification, advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, and self-evaluation are included among the major metacognitive strategies.

B. Cognitive Strategies: It has been stated (Brown, 2007) that “Cognitive strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and they involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself” (p.134). Repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction,

recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transferring, and inference are among the most important cognitive strategies.

C. Socioaffective Strategies: Socioaffective strategies have close relationship with social-mediating activity and interacting with others. The main socioaffective strategies include cooperation and question for clarification (Brown, 2007).

Rubin, who allocated a great deal of effort in the field of language learning strategies, made a distinction between strategies contributing directly to learning and those contributing indirectly to learning.

Direct strategies include metacognitive and cognitive strategies and indirect strategies include communicative and social strategies. According to Rubin, there are three types of strategies used by learners that contribute either directly or indirectly to language learning. They are: A. Learning Strategies, B. Communication Strategies, and C. Social Strategies.

A. Learning Strategies Learning strategies which are divided into two main types (Cognitive Learning Strategies and Metacognitive Learning Strategies) contribute directly to the development of the language system created by the language learner. Cognitive strategies refer to the steps or measures which are taken in learning or problem-solving that involves direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials Rubin's (1987).

B. Communication Strategies Communication strategies are not as much of directly related to language learning since their emphasis is on the process of communication through conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Communication strategies are exploited by speakers when they are faced with some troubles regarding their communication and conversation or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker. A usual communication strategy is to make use of one's linguistic or communicative knowledge to remain in the conversation.

C. Social Strategies Social strategies are activities in which learners are exposed to the opportunities that can be a great help to practice their knowledge. Even though these strategies

offer exposure to the target language, they contribute to learning indirectly since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language (Rubin, 1987).

By referring to the literature, it seems that the most inclusive taxonomy of language learning strategies is provided by Oxford's (1990). Oxford divided language learning strategies into two main categories, direct and indirect strategies which are also subdivided into six classes. Direct strategies, which involve the new language directly, are divided into Memory, cognitive and compensation strategies.

As Oxford's (1990) says, “all direct strategies require mental processing of the language” (p.37).

1. Memory strategies entail the mental processes for storing new information in the memory and for retrieving them when needed. These strategies consist of four sets that include: A. Creating mental linkages, B. Applying images and sounds, C. Reviewing well, and D. Employing action.
2. Cognitive strategies entail conscious ways of handling the target language and fall into four sets which include: A. Practicing, B. Receiving and sending messages, C. Analyzing and reasoning, and D. Creating structure for input and output.
3. Compensation strategies enable learners to use the language either in speaking or writing despite knowledge gaps. These strategies are divided into two sets: A. Guessing intelligently and B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. According to Oxford's (1990), compensation strategies are employed by learners when facing a temporary breakdown in speaking or writing.

Indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Indirect strategies provide indirect support for language learning by employing different strategies such as focusing, arranging, evaluating, seeking opportunities, and lowering anxiety Oxford's (1990).

4. Metacognitive strategies: Meta means “above” or “beyond,” so metacognitive means “beyond” the cognitive. These strategies enable learners to control their own cognition. They are strategies which entail over viewing and linking with material already known, paying attention, delaying speech production, organizing, setting goals

and objectives, planning for a language task, looking for practice opportunities, self-monitoring and self evaluating.

5. Affective strategies assist students to *manage their emotions, motivation, and attitudes associated with learning*. They can be achieved through lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking emotional temperature.
6. Social strategies. Social strategies refer to how learners interact with other people in the context of learning languages and related culture. Social strategies include, among others, *ask someone to speak slowly, practice with others* and *show interest in learning about the culture of English-speaking countries*. This category, sometimes combined with affective strategies, is often part of strategy research (Oxford, 1990, 1996).

However, this study emphasizes a broad range of learning strategies that would contribute to students' efforts at speaking a foreign language. It is with this broad intention in mind that the current study is designed, within the framework of the Second or Foreign Language Learning Strategies Project of the National Language Resource Center at the University of Minnesota.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), the language learner capable of using a wide variety of language learning strategies appropriately can improve their language skills in a better way. Metacognitive strategies improve organization of learning time, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. Cognitive strategies include using previous knowledge to help solve new problems. Socioaffective strategies include asking native speakers to correct their pronunciation, or asking a classmate to work together on a particular language problem. Developing skills in three areas, such as metacognitive, cognitive, and socioaffective can help the language learner build up learner independence and autonomy whereby he can take control of his own learning.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The researcher held discussions with different hotel managers, foreign customers and graduates of Hotel Management in different towns of Ethiopia. The hotel managers stated that, nowadays, the employees who have been graduating in Hotel Management are observed that they are less effective in their oral English communication while they are speaking with foreigners. Correspondingly, some foreign customers whom the researcher met in some hotels told him that

they encountered language communication gap between them and some hotel management personnel although these staffs do have good hospitality. Most of the newly graduated staffs share the hotel managers' idea. That is, they are not as effective as they are expected in their spoken English. According to the idea these graduates presented, the English language course (Hotel English) which they took at their university did not bring them to a high level of speaking proficiency in English as the work place needs.

According to different researchers' findings, such as Rubin (1981), Stern (1975), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), and Pei-Shi (2012), students can be successful in language learning or in their language performance on account of using different language learning strategies. Students who use fewer learning strategies are less effective in their language proficiency. This shows that if an instruction is not scaffolded with language learning strategies, it might be difficult to make the students proficient in English language. On the other hand, what shouldn't be overlooked is the choice of language learning strategies in one country differs from others because one size fits all could not be applied since students grow up in a variety of settings and cultural backgrounds (Oxford, 1993). If low achiever students are scaffolded with the choice of their language learning strategies and introduced with other relevant learning strategies, their language proficiency will become better.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to fill the gap in this area of research by exploring what Language Learning Strategies are commonly used by first year Ethiopian Hotel Management students at Hawassa University. Besides, it planned to measure how frequently the students use the strategies in speaking skills and to develop some conclusion for teachers' awareness the extent to which language learning strategies enhance students' English language proficiency.

Thus, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most common strategies used by high achievers and low achievers?
2. What Language Learning Strategies do Hotel Management students employ during taking Hotel English?

3. How often do the students use these Language Learning Strategies during oral interactions?

2. Research Design and Methods

Pragmatism opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews, and different assumptions, as well as to different forms of data collection and analysis in the mixed methods study (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, in order to reach the findings, this study employed a mixed method design which includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The data which were gathered through close-ended (quantitative method) triangulated with data which were collected through open-ended (qualitative) method for the validity of the data.

2.1. Participants

The total number of participants in the study was 37, 9 females and 28 males, first year Hotel Management students who were taking Hotel English course at Hawassa University. All students were taken to fill out the questionnaire. ESP proficiency test was given to them in determining the selection of high and low achievers.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments

2.2.1. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

Strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) is a standardized measure of language learning strategies with versions of different languages and the most extensive questionnaire for obtaining information on the language learning strategies of Hotel Management students; thus, it has been used to collect and analyze information from language learners worldwide (Chamot, 2005; Ellis 1994). The reported reliability of the SILL (Cronbach's alpha) was found to be between .93 to .98 (Green and Oxford 1995). High validity of SILL was also reported in previous studies and the SILL was significantly related to language performance (Oxford 1990; Cohen and Weaver 2005; LoCastro 1994; Lan 2005).

The current study also adopted SILL as the instrument for collecting data on their use of LLSs. In the inventory, all subjects completed the 50-item SILL which is developed by Oxford (1990). SILL is classified into six subcategories: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies affective strategies, and social strategies.

2.2.2. Proficiency Test

An ESP speaking proficiency test was administered to all participants to identify their level of achievement. The test was a situation which usually happens in a hotel and needs detail explanation, and their presentation was video recorded. The presentation was rated by two TEFL professors based on the rubric which was adopted from Ur (2006).

2.2.3. Interview

Participants of the study were asked to describe their learning processes and strategies they used. This interview was assumed to provide data for validating the questionnaire data. The set of questions were similar from one interview to another and can therefore be considered a semi-structured, qualitative instrument. Interviews were conducted with six low achievers and six high achievers. The content of the interview was similar with the items in questionnaire.

2.3. Procedures of Data Collection

The SILL was administrated to the participants during a regular class hour. Prior to the administration of the research instrument, the faculty was given instructions related to the research task. Relevant statistical analyses were used to analyze the data collected based on the frequency of use of strategies, and the correlation between the type of language learning strategies used and English language proficiency. In addition, for the purposes of data reduction and manipulation, the participants' responses to SILL were reduced to three general categories (see Oxford, 1990; Lan and Oxford, 2003):

- High use = 50 to 35(usually to always used);
- Medium use = 34 to 25(sometimes used); and
- Low use = 24 to 10 (never to usually not used).

Besides, t-test analysis was made to see if there is a statistically significant difference between high and low achievers in using language learning strategies in each sub category level.

In order to identify the high and low achievers, an ESP proficiency test was given. The test was about a situation which was stated as follows:

A person does not get the kind of bedroom that he/she is booked. The complaint is unreasonable. He/she is demanding an up graded room at no extra cost. Whether the complaint is justified or not it must be handled with professionalism. Having this situation, the students made dialogue acting as a compliant and/or as the hotel manager.

2.4. Validity and Reliability of Instruments

For the validity and reliability of the test and to measure the students' achievement, the test was given to three EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructors for evaluation. After some amendments, it was administered. The students' presentation was video recorded. Then, the evaluation rubrics for the speaking test were adopted from SOLOM (Student Oral Language Observation Matrix) and validated by five EFL instructors to suit the local context.

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3. Data analysis

There were three parts in the data analysis of this study: the strategy questionnaire, oral proficiency test and the interview. For the scoring of questionnaires, the scale range for each item is 1 - 5. Frequency counting was conducted to analyze participants' responses to the SILLs questionnaire. Descriptive Statistics was conducted to analyzing participants' scores on the questionnaire. Participants' answers to the interview were transcribed and categorized according to the three main themes in the interview guide.

3.1. Result and Discussion

Table: Summary of High and Low Achiever ESP Students' Strategy Use

Main Categories	High Achievers	Low Achievers
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of LLS	N=15			N=15		
	Mean	Rank	Frequency Level	Mean	Rank	Frequency Level
Memory	3.04	3	Medium	3.15	2	Medium
Cognitive	3.25	4	Medium	3.06	4	Medium
Compensation	3.36	2	Medium	3.07	3	Medium
Metacognitive	3.54	1	High	3.17	1	Medium
Affective	3.12	5	Medium	1.41	6	Low
Social	2.83	6	Medium	2.65	5	Medium

Based on the frequency counting of each item, the results of the strategy questionnaire completed by 37 participants are described below.

With an average of 3.54 and 3.17, metacognitive strategies are preferred most by high achievers and low achievers respectively. This means that although the frequency levels are different, both high and low achievers in this study benefit most from this strategy.

On the other hand, regarding their least preference, respondents of both groups showed differences towards the categories of LLS. As the data in Table shows, high achievers chose social strategies as their least preferred category of strategies among the six main strategies; whereas low achievers employed affective strategies. In the same vein, both groups showed similarly in the use of cognitive strategy. Reading from the Table, one can see that respondents had almost similar preferences towards the indirect learning strategies such as metacognitive, affective and social although the ranks varied on metacognitive and affective strategies. This means that the high and low achievers use the same type of LLS at varying degrees to learn English in ESP context.

Regarding frequency levels, high achievers used metacognitive strategies with high level of frequency. For example, *to pay attention when someone is speaking English, to notice their English mistakes and use that information to help them do better, and to look for people whom they could talk to in English*, and they used Compensation strategies more than other strategies while learning to speak; whereas, the remaining strategies; such as, *to use flashcards to*

remember new English words, to practice the sounds of English, to practice English with other students were employed with moderate level of frequency.

The results of the study, moreover, show that among the 50 language learning strategies *I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English* was the most frequently used strategy while *I write down my feelings in language learning dairy* was the least frequently used by low achievers. Affective strategies were the least frequently used ones. Besides, *I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English* is the most frequently used strategy while *I try to learn about the culture of English speakers* was the least frequently used by high achievers. The interview also confirms that the students have a problem of using affective strategies and social strategies.

It is understood from the interview data that students emphasized linguistic deficiency as the commonest serious problem they encountered during their attempt to communicate in English. For instance, the interviewees depicted they have difficulties to understand the speakers' utterances especially when they speak too fast, they would be nervous when the words disappear from their mind, and they could not figure out the appropriate English words or phrases to express their feelings.

Moreover, concerning to the language learning strategies that they use in their ESP classroom, they mentioned that repeating what others said, guessing meanings based on the context, planning their schedule so they would have enough time to study English and paying close attention to the interlocutor's facial expressions or asking him/her to repeat were the most common strategies they used.

Conclusion

To sum up, low achievers used language learning strategies less frequently than high achievers. Low achievers used all most all strategies with medium range of frequency; whereas, high achievers used metacognitive strategies primarily with high frequency and compensation strategies secondly with medium frequency. This leads us to the conclusion that in foreign language learning, both high and low achievers make use of metacognitive strategies more frequently than the other strategies. This may mean that respondents in both groups more

frequently used metacognitive strategies. This might have happened because they are learning EFL; and they may not have much exposure to the target language and this may hinder them not to get chance to consciously pick up the target language. If low achievers are helped to know and use more learning strategies, they will improve their speaking proficiency a lot.

Finally, this study states that the students maintained the perception of language learning strategies although they used them unconsciously. If ESP students get a chance to know and use more language learning strategies, they may improve their language proficiency. In order to disclose this, a further research is needed the extent to which language learning strategies are helpful to enhance students English language proficiency.

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