Language Learning Strategies Employed by Myanmar Students in Terms of Gender

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Abstract

Language learning strategies employed by Myanmar students who are preparing for IELTS Exam are explored from gender point of view in this research. 63 students including 27 male students as well as 36 female students participated. The aim of this research is to investigate language learning strategies employed by the students from gender dimension. The objectives are to find out the most employed language learning strategy and to reveal which strategies are preferred by male and female learners. The materials are the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning developed by Oxford (1990) as the quantitative method and individual interviews as the qualitative mean. The results shows that the overall students use metacognitive and cognitive strategies mostly, while compensation strategies are used the least. The most employed strategies by male students are metacognitive whereas females apply cognitive strategies most. Moreover, females prefer direct strategies to indirect ones; on the one hand, this trend is reversed for the male students. Students use most strategies in reading skill, and speaking experiences as the less frequent. It is recommended for pedagogical implications to raise awareness about strategy, and deploy teaching methods compatible with students' preference strategies.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, Gender, Myanmar students

Introduction

The demand for efficient and effective teaching and learning process in English Language Teaching Context brings the role of language learning strategies to the surface. Researches on language learning strategies prove that the successful implementation of curricula, teaching styles and assessment in a language course are related with students' language learning strategies. Appropriate language learning strategies are useful in the development of communicative competence, improved proficiency and learner autonomy (Oxford, 1990). Researchers have paid attention on how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they use to understand, learn or remember the information in the area of second or foreign language learning. Based on earlier research into learning strategies, Oxford (1990) developed a new learning strategy system, which includes two main classifications: direct strategies and indirect strategies and which are subdivided into six sub-groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. Direct strategies are defined as "strategies involving mental process and directly influencing the target language, while indirect strategies are those supporting and managing language without directly involving the target language" (Oxford 1990). The direct session is made up of Memory Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, and Compensation Strategies and the rest three are regarded as indirect. These six strategies are comprised by 50 items in the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).

Memory strategies are regarded as mental tools and fall into four sets: Creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, and

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employing actions. Memory strategies are more effective when they are used with metacognitive strategies.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), cognitive strategies operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) subsumed these strategies under three broad groupings: rehearsal, organization, and elaboration processes (which may include other strategies that rely on at least in part upon knowledge in long-term memory such as inferencing, summarizing, deduction, imagery and transfer).

Oxford (1990) stated that compensation strategies are helpful to use the new language for comprehension or production in spite of limitations in knowledge. Compensation strategies also help for repertoire or grammar and especially vocabulary. Compensation strategies exist as ten parts which are divided into two sets: guessing intelligently in listening and reading, and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing.

Metacognitive strategies are used to oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning. Wenden's studies (1982) (Cited in O'Malley and Chamot (1990)) focused on what learners know about various aspects of their language learning and how this influences their choice of strategies.

Language learners can gain control over language by the help of affective strategies. Affective strategies are divided into three sets: lowering your anxiety, encouraging yourself, and taking your emotional temperature. The affective factors may become one of the biggest factors on language learners for their success or failure.

Language is a form of social behavior and communication. Communication can only occur between and among people (Oxford, 1990). Thus, in communication process, appropriate social strategies are very important. Social strategies are divided as three sets: Asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others.

Nam and Leavell (2006) conduct a piece of research named "Language learning strategy use of ESL students in an intensive English learning context" in order to examine the relationship between language learning strategy use and second language proficiency, focusing on differences in strategy use across gender and nationality. 55 ESL students are participated, and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is used as materials. It is found that the students preferred to use metacognitive strategies most, whereas they showed the least use of affective and memory strategies. Females tended to use affective and social strategies more frequently than males.

Tyers (2001) did a study entitled "An investigation into language learning strategies used by a group of Japanese learners of English" with the aim of investigating language learning strategies on 70 first year students of English.The finding is that some students utilize more learning strategies than others.

Another study is "Language Learning Strategy Preferences of Chinese Learners of Myanmar" done by Hlaing and Hein (2016) to investigate language learning strategies preferred by the students. They found that the students prefer to use metacognitive strategies most, whereas they show the least use of memory and compensation strategies. Females tend to use metacognitive strategies most

whereas males were in high use of social strategies. The least preferred use of strategy is compensation strategies by males as well as females.

There is little in the extent literature which focuses specifically on the language learning strategies of students learning English in the context of IELTS (International English Language Teaching System) and Myanmar. Moreover, concerning with research methodology, most of the researches on language learning strategies are solely focused on quantitative method. Therefore, this research investigated the language learning strategy use of English learners in IELTS course in terms of gender, and mixed methodology for research procedure is applied in order to obtain solid data of students. In order to fill the gaps mentioned above, the following aim and objectives are laid down.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to investigate language learning strategies employed by the students who are learning IELTS from gender dimension. The objectives are:

i. To find out the most employed language learning strategies used by male and female learners
ii. To examine which strategies are the most and least employed by overall students
iii. To figure out whether direct strategies outweigh indirect ones depending on the gender
iv. To explore the language skills in which strategies are frequently and least employed

Materials and Method

Participants

Sixty three students who are learning English in the context of IELTS participated in this study. 27 students (43%) out of 63 were males, and the rest 36 students (57%) were females.The age of the students ranged from 16 to 27.9 students (4 males (44%) and 5 females (56%)) participated in interview section. The participants were from various education backgrounds. Most of the students learn English language as the requirements for further study, scholarships opportunity, and job prospects.

Instruments

The questionnaire named The Strategy Inventory for language Learning (SILL) was used to elicit information from the participants. This questionnaire contains five Likert-type responses for each item ranging from 1 to 5 (i.e., from 'never or almost never true of me' to 'always true of me'). It was developed by Oxford (1990) which has a 50- item version for learners of English as a second or foreign language. The questionnaire is provided in two language versions, namely English, and Myanmar in order to provide full comprehension on questions.The data obtained from the questionnaires furnishes a composite score for each category of strategy.

For interviews, participants were asked to answer seven questions which are invented by researchers. They are (1) In which skill do you usually employ language learning strategies among four language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing? (2) How do you learn vocabulary in English? (3) How do

you prepare your exam on English skills; for example, English subject in matriculation exam? (4) Do you make any plan when you are learning English? How? (5) Do you make reflection on your language learning ways? How? (6) Do you prefer learning alone? Why or Why not? (7) Do you praise yourself if you get some achievements in English exam? Records are kept in accordance with the agreement of interviewees.

Data Collection, Data Analysis and Data Interpretation

The questionnaires were distributed to the students. The full descriptive instructions regarding to the procedures of administration were provided before administration. The students were explained about there were no right or wrong answers to any question and their confidentiality was secured and their response would be used for research purposes only. Data analysis includes the computation of descriptive statistics (precentages and frequencies) to compile information about demographics of the participants and to calculate data which are gathered from the questionnaires. Apart from Interview question 1, the data obtained from the other 6 questions are interpreted by the researcher and filled in another questionnaire in order to solid the validity of the quantitative means.

Table 1: The variation of employed language learning strategies between male and female students

Variable	Male		Female	
	Percentage	Rank	Percentage	Rank
Memory Strategies	4%	5	12%	3
Cognitive Strategies	14%	3	53%	1
Compensation Strategies	2%	6	5%	6
Metacognitive Strategies	52%	1	15%	2
Affective Strategies	10%	4	6%	5
Social Strategies	18%	2	9%	4

Table 1 compares the variation of language learning strategies use according gender and it is found that male and female participants used all the strategies with different frequencies, though the uses of male and female students are also different. Metacognitive strategies are mostly employed by male students at the percentage of 52, and female ranks cognitive strategies as highly use. Both of the participants show least employment on Compensation Strategies.

Table 2: The distribution of language learning strategies used by all students

Variable	Overall	
	Percentage	Rank
Memory Strategies	8%	3
Cognitive Strategies	34%	1
Compensation Strategies	4%	4
Metacognitive Strategies	34%	1

Variable	Overall	
	Percentage	**Rank**
Affective Strategies	8%	3
Social Strategies	13%	2

Table 2 indicates the data concerning with the strategies use by all participating students. Surprisingly, metacognitive and cognitive strategies stand together in the first place by 67%, likewise both memory and affective strategies are ranked as the third-employed strategies. Compensation strategies are least employed by overall students.
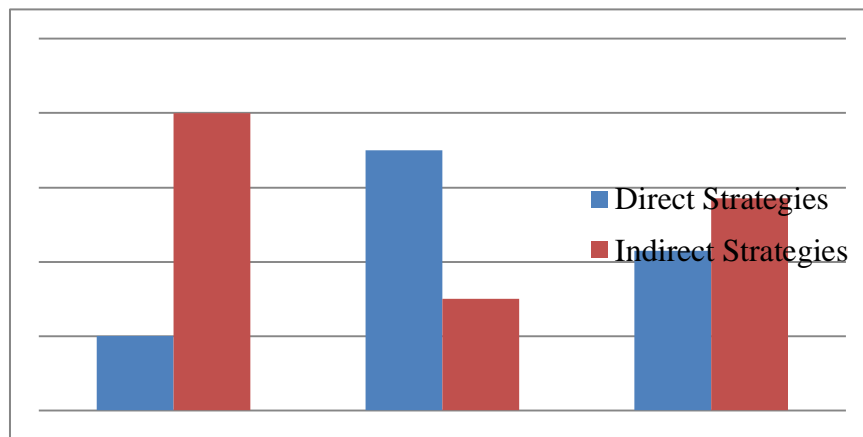

Figure 1: Comparison between the ratio of direct and indirect strategies among gender types and overall

Figure 1 depicts the variations of direct and indirect strategies in terms of males, females, and overall students. More indirect strategies than direct ones are used by male students which this figure is directionally opposite to those in females. Generally, the gap between direct and indirect strategies is not much different.

Interview Question (1): In which skill do you usually employ language learning strategies among four language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing?

Table 3: Language skills in which language learning strategies are mostly employed by male and female students

Language Skills	Male	Female
	Percentage	**Percentage**
Speaking	0%	2%
Reading	53%	62%
Writing	38%	31%
Listening	9%	5%

Table 3 describes the percentage of language skills in which both genders used language learning strategies. It is significant that reading is the area in which

strategies are highly employed by both gender groups. Speaking and listening are the most ignorant areas in which strategies are rarely used.

Results and Discussion

According to the results concerned with gender dimension, male students tend to use metacognitive strategies the most, while females employ cognitive strategies in learning English language. Compensative strategies are the most ignorant types by both gender groups. The preferences of strategies across gender are statistically varied from one to another. The highest use in metacognitive strategies by male can infer that male students are oriented to learning English with the need to manage their learning processes and control of planning, organizing, focusing, and evaluating their own learning, behaviors inherent in most definitions of metacognition. The intensive training environment of the IELTS preparation program may be a prime contributor in several ways to the preferred use and selection of both metacognitive and cognitive strategies. Efficient planning and self-monitoring of one's learning progress (are under both metacognitive behaviors) of the student are instrumental in achieving their goal of high marks in IELTS preparation. Metacognitive knowledge and increases in academic performance go hand in hand.The high use of Metacognitive strategies among male students is similar to an observation among students from Asian countries in particular Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan as reported in some of the studies on Asian students (Oxford, 1990).

Female students describe their most employed strategies as Cognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies such as writing vocabulary several times, practicing the sounds of target language just like native speakers, summarizing the information they have learnt, and making notes show female are producing language skills even after they have understood them. Cognitive strategies become the most favored strategysince they significantly influence the learners' proficiency outcomes. The study of Ungureanu, and Georgescu (2012) has shown that students prefer using a mixture of metacognitive and cognitive strategies, involving an interaction with others in order to learn the target language.

Compensation strategies are regarded as the lowest frequency use by both male and female students. These strategies enable students to make up for missing knowledge in the process of comprehending or producing the target language. However, all the participants are reluctant to use Comprehension strategies, e.g. they do not gesture when they have difficulty to produce the language, and they do not like making up new words when they do not know the right ones. The lowest use of compensation is consistent with the finding of Shmais' (2004) study on "The English Language Learning Strategies of An-Najah National University EFL majors. However, this finding is different from other studies from Asian countries like China, Taiwan and Singapore. It is not surprising why students ignore compensation strategies most because teaching assistants in IELTS program are ready to help them when they are encountering shortcomings in language learning.

It can be concluded that male students prefer to use Metacognitive strategies which is the essence of learning language by planning and monitoring learning whereas females highly employ cognitive strategies, processes of which are understanding and producing the language. Both gender groups highly ignore compensation strategies which are used in overcoming limitations in language learning. So, the results were consistent with those of O'Malley and Chamot's

(1990), Nam and Leavell's (2006), Hlaing and Hein's (2016), and Deneme's (2008).

Moreover, it is also found that Students use language learning strategies mostly when they practise reading skill. Writing is found to stand next. There is no doubt for this result since English in Myanmar context is mainly based on reading and writing skills. Therefore, students should be trained to use the language learning strategies in listening and speaking.

The main limitation of this study is that the scope is a bit narrow in describing the data gained from language learning strategies questionnaires and interview. As the further research, it is recommended that researches on testing on large sample size, finding out the relationship between textbook exercises and students' learning strategies, the correlation aspect between language learning strategies and students' achievements should be conducted.

Conclusion

This research examines the language learning strategies used by Myanmar Students from the gender outlook. The findings indicate that males prefer metacognitive strategies the most and female do cognitive strategies while compensation strategies are used the lowest by both of them. More males than females favor using direct strategies and its reverse trend on each gender. Reading is the area in which language learning strategies are mostly used, and speaking is the least area.The results obtained from this research may suggest some pedagogical implications like selecting and developing compatible materials for students, and practicing effective teaching methods. Since practicing language learning strategies can provide learners' autonomy, one of the most essential educational skills in 21st Century, understanding the importance of using language learning strategies in the process of learning a language will be effective for students. Consequently, teachers should help students cultivate and raise their awareness of language learning strategies. The role of gender should also be given attention in language learning process. It is sure that students can gain benefits from knowing language with positive impacts.

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