

## **LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY DISTANCE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: A study with a Group of Turkish Distance Learners of EFL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Use of language learning strategies is important for language learning. Some researchers state that language learning strategies are important because their use affects the development of communicative competence (Lessard-Clouston, 1997 & Oxford, 1990). Effective use of language learning strategies has particular importance for distance language learners who do not have direct face-to-face contact with their tutors. This study investigates the use of language learning strategies by a group of Turkish distance learners of English. Oxford (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning was used and interviews were conducted to collect data.

The questionnaire results show that affective strategies are used less than the other strategy categories. The reasons for the ignorance of the affective strategies are also mentioned in the study.

**Keywords:** language learning strategies, distance EFL learners, SILL, affective strategies

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are various definitions for the term 'strategy' in the field of language learning and teaching. Scarcella & Oxford (1992) define learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p. 63). According to Oxford (2003), second language learning strategies are specific behaviors or thought processes used by the students to enhance their own L2 learning (Oxford, 2003). Stern (1983) makes 'strategies' and 'techniques' distinction while Seliger (1984) makes 'strategies' and 'tactics' distinction. According to Stern (1983), strategies are the 'general and deliberate approaches' to learning whereas techniques are the observable forms of language learning behaviour in particular language learning areas e.g., grammar and vocabulary. For Seliger (1984), strategies are 'basic abstract categories of processing by which information perceived in the outside world is organized and categorized into cognitive structures as part of a conceptual network' (1984, p. 4) and tactics are variable learning activities used by learners in order to organize a learning situation, or cope with input and output demands.

Both Oxford (1990) and Lessard-Clouston (1997) states that language learning strategies contribute to the development of the communicative competence of the learners. 291

As Oxford (1990) states, language learning strategies "... are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed movement, which is essential for developing communicative competence." In addition, learning strategies have an important role in enabling students to become more independent, autonomous, lifelong learners (Allwright, 1990; Little, 1991).

Tarone (1980) makes a distinction between language learning strategies and skill learning strategies and defines language learning strategies as strategies used by learners to master new linguistic and sociolinguistic information about the target language. On the other hand, skill learning strategies are used by learners so that they become skilled in reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities.

In this study, the focus is on general language learning strategies rather than strategies that can be used to improve a language skill such as vocabulary learning strategies or reading strategies.

### **Taxonomies of Language Learning Strategies**

Different researchers categorize language learning strategies differently. According to Rubin (1987), there are three groups of language learning strategies. These are learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. O'Malley et al. (1985) state that language learning strategies are divided into three categories as: Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, and Socioaffective Strategies. According to Stern (1992), language learning strategies are Management and Planning Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, Communicative - Experiential Strategies, Interpersonal Strategies, Affective Strategies.

From Oxford's (1990) view, taxonomy of language learning strategies is divided into two groups as Direct Strategies and Indirect Strategies. Direct strategies include Memory Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, and Compensation Strategies. Memory strategies are related to creation of mental linkages, use of images and sounds, revision, and actions. Cognitive Strategies are related to making practice, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure. Compensation strategies are related to making guesses, and dealing with problems in oral and written communication. Indirect Strategies are Metacognitive Strategies, Affective Strategies and Social Strategies. Metacognitive Strategies include centering learning, arrangement, planning and evaluation of learning. Affective strategies are used to decrease anxiety, increase self-encouragement, and take one's emotional temperature. Finally, Social strategies include questioning, cooperative work, and emphasizing with other people.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Various studies have been carried out on the relationship between strategy use and various variables such as age, learner styles, proficiency, motivation and culture. Some researchers found that older learners used some strategy categories more often than did younger learners. Out of Oxford's six categories memory, affective, metacognitive, and social strategies are used more often by older learners (Peacock & Ho, 2003) and older learners use cognitively complex strategies whereas young learners prefer social strategies (Victori & Tragant, 2003). Some researchers (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, Oxford, 2001, Carson & Longhini, 2002, Wong & Nunan, 2011 among others) focused on the relationship between language learning strategies and learner styles.

Literature shows controversial results about the relationship between strategy and proficiency. Some studies show that there are significant relationships between the two variables (Bialystock & Fröhlich, 1978; Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Takeuchi, 1993; Park, 1997; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012) whereas other studies showed weak correlations (Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995). Studies show that teaching of language learning strategies improved reading proficiency (Park-Oh, 1994) and speaking proficiency (Dadour & Robbins, 1996; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Küpper, & Russo, 1985), and that advance level students use more language learning strategies than elementary students (Griffiths, 2003a).

Literature also shows that more motivated learners use a wider range of strategies (Mochizuki 1999, Wharton 2000) or use some categories more often than less motivated learners (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Okada et. al., 1996). There is also evidence in the literature that culture affects the use of language learning strategies. Memory strategies are infrequently used by Asian learners (Bedell & Oxford, 1996; Mochizuki, 1999), and European learners use more strategies than learners of other nationalities (Griffiths, 2003b).

### **Importance of the Study**

There is no study in the literature which investigated the language learning strategies used by the distance learners of EFL in the Turkish Open Education System. This study aims to investigate the use of language learning strategies by those learners. The study particularly aims at finding the level of strategy use in general and in terms of strategy category. Even if the use of strategies may be affected by individual differences and personal preferences, the study tries to investigate whether the learners have problems with using certain strategy categories.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Questions**

1. How often do Turkish distance learners of EFL use language learning strategies?
2. Which strategy categories are not preferred by those learners?

### **Participants**

The participants of the study are Anadolu University Open Education Faculty, Distance Science Programs learners who are taking an A2 level English course. The number of students who responded the questionnaire is 63. During the academic year when the study was carried out, learners were taking a three-hour synchronous facilitation service in Adobe environment on voluntary basis, and used a course book as the main course material. The course book is a well-known book written by foreign language specialists and it was adapted for the open education students by offering the Turkish translation of instructions. The book includes the language learning strategies as a separate section. There are suggestions regarding how to organize a working space and having a computer with DVD player and speakers. The students are suggested to watch DVDs, listen to English songs and watch video clips, watch satellite TV, read English newspapers, books, magazines and blogs, practice with a native speaker, find an English-speaking friend by using the social networks in the Internet. The content of the course book was accessible in DVD format and in the online format.

## **Materials**

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990) was used as the questionnaire. It was translated into Turkish by the researcher and the Turkish version was used to prevent the participants from misunderstanding some items because of their insufficiency in English. Some colleagues were asked to read the translated version to verify the clarity of the items. As stated in Oxford's (2003) study, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning has been translated into more than 20 languages and used in dozens of published studies around the world. Grenfell & Macaro (2007) state that the SILL was used to assess the strategy use of more than 10,000 learners worldwide by the mid-1990s. According to Oxford (1996), reliabilities for the ESL/EFL SILL range from .86 to .91.

## **Procedure**

The data was collected in 2012. The questionnaire was prepared in Google Docs and the data was stored there. The students were asked to fill in the questionnaire through an announcement which was put on the home page of their programs. A link was given to the questionnaire there and the students' responses were automatically recorded. In the questionnaire, learners were told that the findings of the questionnaire would not affect their final grade. They were also asked to write their e-mail address for future contact.

After seeing the results of the questionnaire, a small group face-to-face interview was conducted with some learners.

## **Data Analysis**

Means and standard deviations were calculated to analyze the data. For each strategy category, first the mean score and standard deviations of each item in each category was calculated, and then the mean score of the each category was calculated.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Research Question: 1**

The results show that the participants use most of the language learning strategies 'sometimes' (mean around 3). The most frequently used strategies are 'I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English'; 'I say or write new English words several times'; 'To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses'; 'I pay attention when someone is speaking English', 'I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English', 'If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again'.

The least used strategies are 'I use rhymes to remember new English words'; 'I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.'; 'I read English without looking up every new word'; 'I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English', 'I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.', 'I practice my English with other students.'

The findings for each category are shown below:

### **A. Memory Strategies**

Memory strategies used by the participants are shown in Table: 1.

**Table: 1**  
**Memory Strategies Used by the Participants**

Strategy	Mean	SD
<b>I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0.88</b>
<b>I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used</b>	<b>3.44</b>	<b>1.20</b>
<b>I remember the new words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign</b>	<b>3.08</b>	<b>1.25</b>
<b>I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them</b>	<b>2.98</b>	<b>1.03</b>
<b>I connect the sound of an English word and an image or picture of the world to help me remember the word</b>	<b>2.86</b>	<b>1.32</b>
<b>I review English lessons often</b>	<b>2.77</b>	<b>1.23</b>
<b>I physically act out new English words</b>	<b>2.52</b>	<b>1.26</b>
<b>I use flashcards to remember new English words</b>	<b>1.93</b>	<b>1.22</b>
<b>I use rhymes to remember new English words</b>	<b>1.65</b>	<b>1.15</b>

Results show that the participants prefer linking what they are learning and what they have learnt before. They do not prefer using rhymes or flashcards to remember new words.

### **B. Cognitive Strategies**

Cognitive strategies used by the participants are shown in Table: 2.

**Table: 2**  
**Cognitive Strategies Used by the Participants**

Strategy	Mean	SD
<b>I say or write new English words several times</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>1,04</b>
<b>I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>1.37</b>
<b>I try to find patterns in English</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>1.30</b>
<b>I try to talk like native English speakers</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>1,25</b>
<b>I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>1.33</b>
<b>I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>1.38</b>
<b>I try not to translate word-for-word</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>1.25</b>
<b>I use the English word I know in different ways</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>1,27</b>
<b>I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>1,51</b>
<b>I practice the sounds of English</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>1,36</b>
<b>I read for pleasure in English</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>1.39</b>
<b>I start conversations in English</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>1,22</b>

The most frequently used cognitive strategy is saying or writing new English words several times. The least frequently used one is "I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English". The reason is that those students writing proficiency is too low and they are not able to create a written discourse.

### C. Compensation Strategies

Compensation Strategies Used by the Participants are listed in Table: 3.

**Table: 3**  
**Compensation Strategies Used by the Participants**

Strategy	Mean	SD
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses	3.59	1.16
I try to guess what the other person will say next in English	3.28	1.22
I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English	3.28	1.47
When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures	3.22	1.37
If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing	3.16	1.33
I read English without looking up every new word	2.32	1.29

The participants use guessing the meaning strategy to understand unfamiliar words, and the least frequently used strategy is to read English without looking up every new word. Interview results reveal that when learners see a film or listen to a song or a speaker, they make guesses to follow them. It seems that input mode affects the use of strategies. When learners get oral input they use guessing strategies whereas when they get written input they need to refer to a dictionary. It is also possible that when learners watch a film they use contextual clues, actions and movements to guess the meaning whereas they do not have such an opportunity while they are reading. Also, they may not want to intervene the conversation or they may not have the chance to stop the speaker or a film in order to look up the unknown words in a dictionary. However, they can stop reading, refer to a dictionary and then go on reading when they are involved in a reading activity.

### D. Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive Strategies Used by the Participants are demonstrated in Table:4.

**Table: 4**  
**Metacognitive Strategies Used by the Participants**

Strategy	Mean	SD
I pay attention when someone is speaking English	4.05	1.10
I try to find out how to be a better learner of English	3.59	1.28
I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better	3.47	1.34
I think about my progress in learning English	3.35	1.31
I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English	3.05	1.25
I have clear goals for improving my English skills	2.98	1.25
I look for people I can talk to in English	2.88	1.34
I plan my schedule so I have enough time to study English	2.64	1.26
I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English	2.60	1.24

The most frequently used metacognitive strategy is paying attention when someone is speaking English. The least used strategy is to look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English. The reason maybe that learners' vocabulary knowledge is weak and they do not consider reading as a fun activity. As seen in the compensation strategies category, least frequently used compensation strategy is to read English without looking up every new word. This is because learners feel the need to look up the unknown words in a dictionary and they cannot deal with the unknown words since most words and also the structures are unknown to them.

### E. Affective Strategies

Affective strategies used by the participants are stated in Table: 5.

**Table: 5**  
**Affective Strategies Used by the Participants**

Strategy	Mean	SD
I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English	2.65	1.38
I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake	2.52	1.34
I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying English	2.48	1.42
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English	2.13	1.34
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English	2.13	1.34
I write down my feelings in a language learning diary	1.67	1.08

The most frequently used strategy is "I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English".The least frequently used strategy is "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary". Similar finding regarding to diary keeping was also found in Altunay's (2013) study which was carried out with another group of distance EFL learners.

### F. Social Strategies

Social strategies used by the participants are stated in Table: 6.

**Table: 6**  
**Social Strategies Used by the Participants**

Strategy	Mean	SD
If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again	3.30	1,31
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers	3.30	1.39
I ask questions in English	3.24	1.34
I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk	3.11	1,43
I ask for help from English speakers	3.03	1.34
I practice my English with other students	2.60	1,29

It seems that keeping a diary is not a frequently done activity by distance language learners in Turkey. Learners do not keep a diary in English because their writing proficiency is low, and also they do not want to share their feelings even in a diary because they do not want other people to find and read them.

The most frequently used strategies in this category are "If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again" and "I try to learn about the culture of English speakers". "I practice my English with other students" is the least frequently used strategy.

**Research Question: 2**

The study shows that the mean is approximately 3 for each category, except the affective strategies. The table below shows the means for the each strategy category.

**Table: 7**  
**Strategies Used by the Participants on the Basis of Categories**

Category	Mean
Metacognitive Strategies	3.18
Compensation Strategies	3.14
Social Strategies	3.10
Cognitive Strategies	2.90
Memory Strategies	2.80
Affective Strategies	2.37

This means the participants use the language learning strategies 'sometimes' but they use affective strategies less frequently than the other strategy categories. The results indicate that the participants use the affective strategies 'rarely'. White (1993) states that distance learners might be expected to make wider and more frequent use of affective strategies to cope with the tension and concerns which stem from their isolated context. The current study yields a different result, however.

The results of the questionnaire shows similar findings with some studies in that affective strategies are the least frequently used strategies by learners from different nationalities (Oxford, 1990; Bremner,1999; Wharton, 2000; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Chang et. al, 2007) and Dulger's (2012) study which was carried out with Turkish EFL learners. However, affect is important in language learning. As stated by Krashen (1982), learners need a low affective filter to process the input. In other words, learning occurs in a relaxed environment. Therefore, language learners need to be aware of the affective strategies and use them if they feel tension while learning a second language.

There can be two main reasons for the rare use of the affective strategies: One is that participants do not feel the need to use them because they do not have any affective problem. Another reason may be that participants suffer from tension or anxiety but they do not use affective strategies because they are not aware of those strategies.

The questions which were asked in the interview are as follows:

- Do you feel anxious while speaking or studying English?
- Do you share your feelings about how you feel while learning English?
- Do you notice if you're anxious while learning English?
- Do you write your feelings about learning English in a diary?

The interview results show that anxiety stems from low proficiency level. More specifically, problems with comprehension, expressing oneself, and insufficient vocabulary knowledge results in tension. Some learners do not pay attention to their feelings because they are not interested in to do so. According the Oxford's (1993) study, the reason may be the learners' unfamiliarity with paying attention to their own feelings as part of the L2 learning processes. The learners reported the following:

*I feel anxious because I cannot understand or express myself.*

*I feel anxious because my vocabulary knowledge is weak. However, when I say simple things such as 'sit down', 'welcome', I become motivated and excited.*

The results comply with Hurd's (2007) study which shows that the students did not seem very comfortable sharing their anxiety with other learners or their tutors, or even expressing their anxious feelings privately, i.e. in writing. As stated by Hurd & Xiao (2010) seeking help is seen as a threat to self-esteem.

In the current study, even if learners avoid from sharing feelings which are related to anxiety, they envy their successful peers and tell this to them. Two participants stated the following:

*I do not share my own feelings but when I hear that one of my friends is speaking English, I become happy. I say to her, "I wish I could speak as well as you English."*

*I don't share my feelings. I'm not so interested in learning English so I do not think about how I feel while studying English.*

*I don't keep a diary, but I watch films and listen to songs. When I watch a film or listen to a song sometimes I learn other things. For example, a few days ago I heard a name in a song, I searched it on the Internet and I've learned that it is a place in England.*

It seems being graded makes learners anxious. Interlocutors' proficiency is also important. Learners may feel more confident when their interlocutors' proficiency level is not higher than theirs. A participant stated that she was more anxious when she was a younger student.

*Tension is related to age. When I was a student at high school, I was concerned about whether my sentences were correct or not. But, now, I left that psychology. I do not check whether my grammar is correct or not and I don't mind whether my interlocutor can understand my accent. I say myself "this person will not grade my English as if I am his student", and I relax. Moreover, when I realize that my interlocutors' English is not good, I feel more relaxed.*

## **CONCLUSION**

The study investigated the use of language learning strategies by a group of distance learners of EFL. More specifically, the study investigates how often language learning strategies are used by distance EFL learners and which strategy categories are used the least by those learners.

The study shows that the participants use the strategy categories 'sometimes'. However, they use the affective strategies 'rarely'. According to the interview results, learners do not use the affective strategies because some of them are not interested in learning a foreign language and they do not pay so much attention to the physical anxiety reactions. For some students, low proficiency is the main source of anxiety. Nevertheless, when learners see that they are able to say something in English, they become happy and relaxed. It seems learners need more encouragement and they need to see that they are able to communicate. If the interlocutors' level is too much above the learners' level, learners feel tension. In addition, they feel less anxiety in an assessment-free environment.

Learners should be taught how to deal with communication break downs, how to communicate when learners do not remember a word (substitution, miming etc.) or what types of questions should be asked when they do not understand something. They need to learn relaxation techniques and be more open to share their feelings with their tutor or peers. Starting from the high school years learners should be taught that afraid of something or feeling anxious does not mean weakness. They should be encouraged to be risk-taker. Group works and fun activities can be encouraged not only in on campus but also in distance education settings. Studies which were conducted with on-campus Turkish EFL learners show that high expectations, beliefs about language learning, the teaching procedures, teachers' manner towards learners and their errors (Aydin, 2001), fear of negative evaluation and learners' self-perspective of ability in the target language are the sources of anxiety (Aydin, 2008; Subasi, 2010).

The current study, which was carried out with distance learners, indicates that learners' proficiency, their interlocutors' proficiency, and fear of evaluation are some of the causes of tension.

There is already evidence in the literature that computer-mediated communication can help decrease anxiety and increase motivation (Roed, 2003; Hauck & Hurd, 2005).

Therefore, it is also possible that the participants' tension in distance learning setting is different from their tension in face-to-face settings. Some learners who feel relaxed and who do not need to use affective strategies while writing or speaking to their classmates in facilitation sessions or in virtual environments may feel more tension while they have to talk face-to-face with other learners or native speakers, and hence they may need to use affective strategies more often in face-to-face interaction environments than in virtual settings.

Future research should investigate whether there is a significant difference between the anxiety levels of distance language learners depending on the instruction and production settings.

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