

The Use of Grammar Learning Strategies by Libyan EFL Learners at Sebha University

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Abstract:

For most English language learners, grammar can be a very hard subject and some students tend to use different types of strategies to learn grammar. Using learning strategies is very beneficial as they facilitate the learning process and make it more controlled, enjoyable and effective for learners. This study explores the grammar learning strategies used by Libyan EFL undergraduate students at the English Department of Sebha University and the most frequents used strategies. The study also aims to find out if there is a significant difference between the students' use of learning strategies and gender. The population of the study were 121 Libyan EFL undergraduate students who are currently in their first and second years. Data was collected through questionnaire distributed to the participants in the class. The present study used quantitative approach. The results of the study revealed that Libyan EFL learners used different types of grammar learning strategies which included memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, socio-affective strategies and cognitive strategies which were the least frequent used ones. It was found that the most frequent used strategies were memory strategies. The findings also showed that there was no significant difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and the participants' genders.

Keywords: *grammar, learning strategies, Libyan EFL learners*

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, there was a great tendency to move towards learner-centred teaching rather than teacher-centred approach where students' duties of the process of their learning are more increased and maximized. With regard to learner-centred teaching, more attention has been given to the strategies which learners use during the learning process (Al Abri, Al Seyabi, Al Humaidi & Hasan, 2017). This study attempts to investigate the use of grammar learning strategies among Libyan EFL language learners of English. Pudin (2017) claims that the question of how can teachers make a lecture more interesting, enjoyable and even efficient, is not a very strange issue for teachers of English nowadays. In teaching grammar some teachers have tried to come up with techniques and strategies that can be used to teach grammar in an interesting way, bearing in mind that grammar is one part of a language which can be very dry, hard and even boring for most students. The traditional approaches of teaching grammar in the classroom are either inductive or deductive. The disadvantages of these traditional classrooms is that the class period is too limited and short, there is not adequate time for thinking critically and asking questions and there is not ample time for students to have discussion and interaction in the classroom as there is less opportunity for active learning. By understanding and realizing this, active approaches and methods of learning have been recognized in order to make grammar teaching and learning more effective, fruitful and collaborative in the classroom (Pudin, 2017). Teachers of English play major roles in introducing the learning strategies inside the classroom while teaching grammar. The teacher's job is to simplify and facilitate the process of teaching by presenting a variety of strategies in which learners can select the most appropriate used ones. Teachers can direct the class not from a teaching perspective only, but also from a learner's standpoint. Consequently, it is not only grammar teaching methods which require more attention. The teacher must aid the students to comprehend grammatical rules and the structure of grammar patterns. By doing so, learners can actively handle the task and be able to select strategies that can be more suitable in learning grammar (Stavre & Pashko, 2016).

Learning strategies can be defined as "any set of operations, steps, plans routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieved, and usage of information" (Wenden and Rubin, 1987, p.19). Grammar is one of the language aspects that learners may not have a command on and is considered as difficult to learn and requires some techniques to use. "since grammar is complex, and students' learning styles vary, learning grammar is not likely to be accomplished through a single means." (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 40). This also applies to Cornwall (2010) who identified that if learners are prepared with adequate grammatical knowledge, they will be able to write with the correct grammar of the language. In addition, Pagcaliwagan (2016) asserts that teaching grammar to students is essential because it equips them with deep understanding and proficiency in the language. It also directs and helps them understand. For instance, students will know how sentences are constructed, how to select vocabulary used and the types of words that encompass a sentence. In fact, without grammar even messages could be decoded

wrongly and meaning is behind due to the important role that grammar plays in one's language. Muncie (2002) opines that "grammar is just as important an instrument of communication, and a text cannot be written cohesively without attention being paid to how meaning is being expressed through grammar." (p. 183). Furthermore, Syam (2017) points out that learning grammar is a significant aspect in language learning. If learners do not have a deep and good knowledge of grammar, they will certainly commit many mistakes in writing or speaking. The knowledge of grammar for foreign learners is the main framework to construct sentences which can be used for communication in English. Therefore, if the students do not know how to make and build sentence, they will not be able to communicate well in English. Additionally, knowing grammar is very essential because it is a way of attaining linguistic accuracy; the more correctly and accurately a message is conveyed, the lesser the chances for misapprehension and misunderstanding in communication. If there is no grammatical competence, communicators do not take part willingly and completely and communication tend to be failure (Bayou, 2015).

It seems that learning different strategies can affect learning grammar. "no cognitive model of second/foreign language grammar learning would be complete without considering strategies". (Fotos, 2001, p.280). Additionally, Zekrati (2017) states that "although grammar is one of the biggest components of every language course, it should be accompanied by some learning strategies in EFL settings in order to be served as a means of accurate and fluent communication." (p.129). According to Bayou (2015) a good language learner tries to find methods and ways to use language strategies in order to be more successful in learning language. These strategies can make learning more effective if they make the best use of learning strategies during learning a foreign language. Several language learners fail to learn a foreign or a second language due to the fact that they are not self-directed or they get used to be spoon-fed learners. Moreover, Fernandez (2017) argues that the best language learners always use strategies of any types to learn the new language. However, for some language learners, the problem is to find the most appropriate ways to use language learning strategies and to know more about these strategies. Debata (2013) asserts that grammar can aid students to correct their mistakes and improve their writing. He indicates that a foreign language cannot be learnt perfectly and accurately through a process of unconscious assimilation only. Thus, grammar is very essential for learners. As stated by Brown (2007), recent cognitive theories to learning emphasize that learning is productive, cumulative, active, and self-directed process that rely on the learners' mental activities rather than merely being an observable stimulus-response process. Strategic learning leads to fruitful results as it helps learners to retain information for further use. Learning strategies can also be described as "the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal." (Chamot, 2004, p.14).

The variable that this paper attempts to highlight, is gender and its relation to the use of grammar learning strategies. Gender is the one which is assumed to have a deep influence on learners' choice of strategy among the numerous factors that are generally perceived to impact the use of language learning strategies (Oxford &

Nyikos, 1989 cited in Zeynali, 2012). Moreover, in the investigation on the development of second and foreign language, gender has been paid little attention even though it is supposed to have a direct relationship with language (Bidlake, 2007; Oxford, 1992).

Since the aim of this study is to explore the use of grammar learning strategies by Libyan EFL learners of English, it is important to notify that this study also addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the types of grammar learning strategies that Libyan EFL learners use?
2. What are the most frequent used strategies?
3. Is there any significant difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and gender?

2. Literature Review

The teaching and learning of grammar can help promote the linguistic development of learners via structural organization of all the language skills; when adequate attention is paid to both meaning and form, then learners can completely acquire them and will be able to accomplish learning outcomes (Tilfarlioglu & Yalçin, 2005, p. 158). Additionally, teaching a variety of structures of grammar in meaningful context affects the competency of language learning (Ellis, 2006). As any other parts of the language, grammar has a major role in learning language. The majority of EFL learners perceive the grammar learning as an intellectual knowledge of the language that makes them more confident when they use the language. Similarly, some EFL teachers believe that learning grammar efficiently offers a generative foundation for learners on which they can create their knowledge and be able to use the language proficiently. EFL learners adopt some certain methods and techniques which they use deliberately during learning grammar. These methods are called grammar learning strategies where learners obtain grammatical knowledge to learn language in an easy, fast and enjoyable way (Ellis, 2006). Learning strategies can be defined as definite actions which the learner takes to make learning fast, easy and interesting (Oxford, 1990, p.8). Learning strategies can also be defined as “any set of operations, steps, plans routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and usage of information” (Wenden & Rubin, 1987, p.19). More specifically, Oxford, Rang Lee and Park (2007) state that grammar learning strategies are cautious actions and thoughts used by EFL learners to learn the language in an easy, successful and efficient way. These strategies are frequently used by learners to regulate, control and facilitate the learning process (Griffiths, 2008).

According to Oxford (1990) learning strategies are divided into two types: direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies can be categorized into: memory, cognitive, and compensation. Memory strategies include the ability to arrange items in order, create mental linkages and reviewing. Memory strategies “aid in entering information into long-term memory and retrieving information when needed for communication.” (Oxford, 1990, p. 71). On the other hand, indirect strategies

involves metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Furthermore, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified language learning strategies into cognitive, meta-cognitive and social strategies. Cognitive strategies deal directly with the information received and the use of these information to improve learning. Cognitive strategies comprise conscious actions which the language learners take to handle the received information such as taking notes, using resources and forming and organizing information. Meta-cognitive strategies entail language learners to make plans such as planning their own learning, observing their own speech and being able to evaluate their success of a definite strategy. The third types of learning strategies is social strategies in which learners socially interact with other people to learn the language.

In several foreign contexts and countries, such as Libya, the grammar translation method is regarded as the best method of teaching and learning English until now (Arabsheibani & Manfor, 2007). The majority of Libyan universities still depend on using traditional methods and approaches of teaching. Libyan EFL students use their textbooks as a main source of learning grammar and when they learn new grammatical rules, they memorize these rules in order to understand them. Some Libyan teachers also focus on the materials given to students and they do not encourage their students to use any techniques or strategies in the classroom because he/ she is the main source who provides students with everything. In addition, in most Libyan classrooms grammar is taught deductively; teacher explains the rules, gives one or two examples and then asks students to memorize the rules and do some drills without making sure whether the students understand the rules or not. According to Ahmed (2012) the most instructional method used in the Libyan classes is grammar translation method in which the formal method of grammar is considered as a remedy. Grammar is a fundamental part in the classroom. Teacher is the only one who controls the class and does everything while students are not engaged in using any strategies or activities. Thus, these students are passive learners who are taught grammatical rules and list of vocabularies that should only be memorized for the sake of exam which can be forgotten so easily in a later time. Similarly, Latiwish (2003) states that learning English as a foreign language in Libya focuses on mastering the rules of grammar and vocabulary. The English curriculum as well as the course books are planned mainly to promote learning by memorization. Latiwish (2003) goes on to say that grammar translation method is used in most Libyan classrooms for two reasons: teachers themselves have been taught using such a method and students' learning ways and methods are affected by weak and less interaction with teachers in the class.

Grammar learning strategies used by learners of English as a foreign or a second language have not been widely explored yet. There have been only few studies undertaken on this issue. Bayou (2015) points out that research on the exploration of the use of grammar learning strategies by students has not been extensively studied though grammar has a major role to play in every educational field. Therefore, more research has to be done to investigate the use of learning strategies

when learning grammar. A study was carried out by Al Abri et al (2017) to find out the types of learning strategies which Omani EFL students use in learning grammar. The findings of the study showed that Omani students used three types of learning strategies. These strategies were meta-cognitive strategies, which were used more frequently, cognitive and socio-affective strategies. Moreover, Tilfarlioglu and Yalcin (2005) explored the use of grammar learning strategies among Turkish learners at the University of Gaziantep. The findings of the study revealed that 70% of the students employed different grammar learning strategies which involved cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective. Saricoban (2005) investigated the strategies employed by Turkish EFL learners in learning English grammar. Questionnaire was used to explore which grammar learning strategies used by those students. The learning strategies were classified into cognitive, meta-cognitive, and social-affective strategies. The results of the study revealed that Turkish students unconsciously used the cognitive strategies and these learners needed to use socio-affective strategies to study and learn grammar competently. In addition, Gimeno (2002) conducted an experimental research based on O'Mally and Chamot's classification of learning strategies. The study aimed to investigate the efficiency of teaching students the use of cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies in learning grammar. The findings of the study reported that the experimental group which used cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies achieved a great improvement in comprehending the rules of grammar than the control group did. The researcher inferred that teaching students how to use learning strategies can assist them develop their language proficiency and motivate them to be more independent learners. Another study by Mereba (2013) to explore grammar learning strategies used by Ethiopian students at Jimma University. The results indicated that students used three learning strategies in learning grammar. These strategies were cognitive, compensation and memory strategies.

Research on the development of second and foreign language has showed that gender has received little attention despite that it has a straight relationship with language (Bidlake, 2007; Oxford, 1992). Little research on the differences of gender in second and foreign languages has focused on the way people learn languages and on the selection of strategies that they use in language learning (Oxford, 1992). Gender is regarded as a significant element that can affect the use and choice of language learning strategies in language learning, and it also has a great influence on the choice of strategy (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989 cited in Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). Some researchers have found that males and females use different strategies with respect to their gender. Gürata (2008) conducted a study to investigate which learning strategies Turkish EFL learners use when learning grammar and the difference in learning strategies use by gender. The results showed that Turkish EFL learners used different types of learning strategies, and it was also found that there is a significant difference between males and females with regard to their strategy use. The main findings reported that females used metacognitive and social affective strategies more than the males. Another study by Radwan (2011) to examine the influence of second language proficiency and gender on the use of language learning strategies by university students. The findings revealed that male

students used more social strategies than female students. Moreover, Bayou (2015) explored the use of grammar learning strategies among students of Medhanealem Preparatory School and the differences between the two genders. The results showed that there were no significant differences between the use of grammar learning strategies and gender. Similarly, Rahimi, Riazi & Saif (2008) investigated the factors influencing the use of language learning strategies among Persian EFL learners. The findings revealed that gender did not have any significant effect on the use of language learning strategies.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study comprised 121 Libyan EFL undergraduate students who are studying English as a foreign language at the English Department of Sebha University. The participants were first and second years students who have been learning English for more than 8 years. These students study different courses of grammar during their first and second years. All of these courses are basic and compulsory for them to study and pass exam. There were 15 males and 106 females whose ages ranged between 18-26 years old. The distribution of participants by gender and age are shown below in table 1 and table 2. As can be seen from table (1), 87.6% of the participants are females and 12.4% are males. The females outnumbered the males because in Sebha University there are more female students than male students. As shown in table (2), the first age group (18-20) has the highest percentage (57%) whereas the third age group (24-26) has the least percentage (5.8%). The participants of the current study were selected using purposive sampling.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
MALE	15	12.4
FEMALE	106	87.6
Total	121	100

Table 2. Distribution of participants by age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18—20	69	57
21—23	45	37.2
24—26	7	5.8
Total	121	100

3.2 Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Data was collected through questionnaire administrated to the participants in the class. The aim of the questionnaire is to explore the types of grammar learning strategies used by Libyan EFL students and the most frequent used ones. The questionnaire also aims to find out if there is a significant difference between the use

of learning strategies and the participants' genders. The questionnaire involved two sections. The first section contained demographic information about the participants such as age, gender, etc. Whereas the second section contained 32 items, and it was divided into four parts pertaining to the different types of grammar learning strategies that students use. The first part encompassed memory strategies and the second part involved metacognitive strategies. With respect to the third part, it comprised cognitive strategies and the last part included socio-affective strategies.

During data collection process, the following procedures were carried out: first, a permission was sought from lecturers, who teach first and second years students, to allow researchers meet the students. Subsequently, the researchers met the students and informed them about the purpose of the study. Students were told that data obtained from the questionnaire will be used for research purposes only and they will be dealt with confidentially. The questionnaire was handed out to the students in the class and they took 10 minutes to complete it. Clarification as well as instructions of how to fill in the questionnaire were given to the students. Some items, which were not clear for students, were translated into their first language in order to help them understand well. In addition, students were freely allowed to ask any question regarding the items of the questionnaire.

3.3 Reliability of the Questionnaire

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was checked using the Cronbach alpha to measure the reliability of the questionnaire. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was calculated to be 0.75 which was found to be acceptable.

3.4 Data Analysis

In order to answer the three research questions, the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed in various methods. In analysing data, this study used descriptive and inferential statistics. Data were entered into the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS version 14) and the following statistical methods were used:

1. Descriptive statistics that include frequencies and percentages were calculated.
2. Cronbach alpha was used for reliability.
3. z- test was used to find out the differences between the use of the four grammar learning strategies and gender .
4. Chi square test.

4. Results

This section will present the quantitative results for the three research questions addressed in the current study. Table 1 below shows the results of the first and second research questions.

Q1. What are the types of grammar learning strategies that Libyan EFL learners use?

Q2. What are the most frequent used strategies?

Table 1. Grammar learning strategies used by Libyan EFL learners

Order	Strategies	P-Y	P-N	Total
1	Memory strategies	0.72	0.28	100
2	Meta-cognitive strategies	0.71	0.29	100
3	Cognitive strategies	0.69	0.31	100
4	Socio-affective strategies	0.69	0.31	100

As can be seen in the above table, P-Y stands for percentage of participants who marked "Yes" and P-N stands for the respondents who marked "No". It is noticed that there is a slight preference between the four strategies. Though the four strategies are close in percentage, memory strategies are considered to be the highest strategies (0.72) used among the participants. According to these percentages, Chi square test has been used to test the following hypothesis:

Null hypothesis: there are no differences between the percentages for the four strategies.

Alternative hypothesis: there are differences between the percentages for the four strategies.

According to the responses given by the sample of the study, Chi square amount was calculated to be (3.36) and the probable amount for this was (0.33) which is more than 0.05. So, this identifies that null hypothesis is accepted, i.e. there are no differences between the percentages of the four strategies according to the participants' responses.

Q3. Is there any significant difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and gender?

Table 2. The difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and gender

Strategies	Gender	Percent	Z-test	P-value
Memory Strategies	Male	0.71	-0.24	0.81
	Female	0.73		
Meta-cognitive Strategies	Male	0.75	1.15	0.25
	Female	0.70		
Cognitive Strategies	Male	0.72	0.85	0.39
	Female	0.69		
Socio-affective Strategies	Male	0.76	1.75	0.07
	Female	0.69		

With regard to the third research question, table 2 represents the analysis of the relationship between the use of learning strategies and gender. To find out if there is a significant difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and gender, z- test was used. According to z- test, the results show that there is no significant difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and gender because the amount of the P- value is more than the levels of significance, i.e., 0.05 ($P > 0.05$).

Based on the results of the above table, it can be understood that gender does not have any significant influence on the use of grammar learning strategies.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore the use of grammar learning strategies among Libyan EFL learners as well as the significant role that gender, as a variable, plays in using these strategies. Furthermore, this study seeks to find out which strategy is used more frequently in learning grammar. The findings of this study revealed that memory and meta-cognitive strategies were the most frequent strategies used by Libyan EFL learners. The results of the current study is in contrast with what Oxford (1990) has indicated regarding the use of memory strategies by learners of language. She stated that in spite of the great contribution that memory strategies make to language learning, some studies showed that learners of language hardly report using these strategies, particularly those who are above elementary levels of language learning. With regard to cognitive and socio-affective strategies, the results of this study showed that these two strategies were reported to be the least frequent ones used by the participants of the study. The findings of this study agree with another study by Ahmadi and Mahmoodi (2012) which reported that cognitive strategies were the least applied strategies among the language learners of English. Furthermore, the results of the present study are compatible with studies of (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Ozmen & Gulleroglu, 2013; Tam, 2013; Mereba, 2013) which found that affective strategies were the least preferred strategies. In other studies that contradict the results of the current study is a study by Ahmadi and Mahmoodi (2012) which showed that affective strategies were the most used strategies by the learners. It might be due to some reasons such as being less motivated while learning structural item. In addition, the reasons behind learners' negative tendency in the use of affective strategies is that those learners have less desire to notice and monitor their personal feelings, attitudes and emotions during learning grammar (Bayou, 2015).

Generally, in language learning strategies, the role of gender has been the core of several studies for a long period of time. Though some scholars did not reach to a conclusion regarding that, because gender is unstable variable in all cases and it depends on other factors such as social factors, biological factors and cultural factors (Bayou, 2015). In terms of the significant role that gender plays to explore the use of grammar learning strategies, several studies were conducted to identify whether males or females use these strategies most. Furthermore, as the current study shows no significant difference between males and females in terms of strategies used, Rahimi, Riazi and Safi (2008) stated that as a result of gender, there were no differences in strategy use by Persian EFL learners. Moreover, the findings of this study is consistent with previous studies (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Li, 2005; Nisbet, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005; Radwan, 2011; Wahyuni, 2013) which revealed that there was no significant difference between gender and the use of grammar learning strategies.

In contrast to the current study, Salahshour, Sharifi and Salahshour (2013) reported that females use cognitive strategies more than males. Regarding the dominant role

of females over males in strategies use in Hong Kong university, Tam's (2013) study implied that male students do not prefer to grasp opportunities to ask and communicate and get help from other learners of English to improve their skills. Likewise, in studying grammar learning strategies by Turkish EFL learners, Gürata's (2008) showed that female dominance in strategies use is clear. The main findings indicated that meta cognitive, social and affective strategies were used by females more than males which contradict that findings of the current study. Moreover, Radwan (2011) found out that social strategies were reported to be frequently used by males more than females which is similar to the findings of the current study.

Ellis (2006) referred to the fact that to attain advanced level of grammatical competence and performance which is part of communicative competence, this requires instructed learning. In addition, there is abundant practical evidence that teaching methods which emphasis mainly on meaning with no attention to grammar are insufficient (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Generally, researchers, in terms of strategy use, agree that gender difference in the use of strategy may result from many factors such as language learning experiences, socialization, learning styles and life experience.

6. Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that first and second years Libyan students at Sebha University are not fully aware of the importance of the use of learning strategies while learning grammar. These students have more tendency to rely on memory strategies in particular as they find them more easy and applicable to use than other strategies. In spite of the fact that memory strategies can be used to memorize vocabulary and structures in the first phases of language learning, learners will not need those strategies so much when their vocabulary and structures have become more expanded (Oxford, 1990; 2003). Cognitive strategies are very important in learning grammar and they are the most common strategies used by language learners (Oxford, 1990). Based on the results of this study, cognitive strategies were the least frequent used as most Libyan learners still follow the traditional methods of learning grammar such as memorization. Pathan and Aldersi (2014) state that the majority of the Libyan teachers depend greatly on traditional grammar translation method which means that all the texts and grammatical structures are literally translated and students are assumed to memorize abundant of grammatical rules and structures. Moreover, Libyan EFL students do not use other resources such as newspapers, dictionaries etc. to learn grammar, they do not participate in conversations and they do not analyze grammatical structures presented to them. In addition, some Libyan students do not work and interact with their peers in the class, instead they prefer to work on their own most of the time. These students also do not prefer to ask questions, and they feel less confident about participating in the classroom.

It is suggested that more attention should be paid to the use of learning strategies in the classroom. Teachers should encourage their students to employ a variety of learning strategies while learning grammar as they facilitate learning process and

make it more interesting for the students. Additionally, students should also adopt strategies which they find more appropriate and beneficial for them. Furthermore, all the traditional teaching methods should be replaced by more advanced methods and approaches. When teaching grammar in the classroom, teachers must motivate their students to work in pairs, participate and interact with each other and use strategies rather than being passive recipients only. Teachers should also make students more familiar with all the types of grammar learning strategies and help them be more aware of the significance of these strategies.

This study is limited to the first and second years students whereas third and fourth years students are not involved due to the fact that grammar is only taught to first and second years students. Another limitation is that data collection methods started almost at the end of the semester and some students were absent when the questionnaire was distributed. In addition, some other students left some items of the questionnaire unanswered and they were excluded. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all the first and second years Libyan students at the Department of English of Sebha University. It is recommended that further research should focus on a larger number of students to achieve the generalization of the study. It is also recommended that more studies should be conducted to investigate the use of grammar learning strategies in the Libyan context. Further research should also consider the relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies and other variables such as age, achievement, proficiency, motivation and attitudes.

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