Omani Undergraduate Students' Strategy Use During Their Independent Learning Hours: A Cross-Generational Study on Language Learning

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Abstract - The present empirical study aimed at investigating the learning strategies of three different generations of Omani undergraduate students. In doing so, twelve participants from three generations were selected based on purposive sampling. Participants of the study were selected among the International Foundation Program students studying at Gulf College, Muscat, Oman. The next step involved collecting data on participants' learning strategies during their independent learning hours. Data were collected through the framework presented by Jiang and Smith (2009) for EFL learning techniques. Then, similarities and differences of the findings were compared and contrasted. Based on the findings of the study, 'memorization and rote learning' was the most frequent type of learning strategy utilized by all participants from three generations. In addition, findings revealed that using the 'mother tongue pronunciation in order to memorize the materials' was observed to be the second most-frequent learning strategy among all participants. Finally, the role of historical aspects on determining the usage of a learning strategy was discussed.

Key Words: EFL, Learning Strategies, Cross-Generational Study, Independent Learning Hours, Omani Undergraduate Students, International Foundation Program.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are many definitions as to what language means. Based on a systematic definition provided by Brown and Levinson (1987), it is mostly regarded as the capacity of human beings to acquire and utilize complicated systems with the sole purpose of communication. Based on this definition, a language is considered as any specific instance of such a system. To date, many scholars in the realm of linguistics have provided meta-models in order to delve into different aspects of language teaching and learning (Brown 2000, Falk 1978).

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is one of the most controversial sub-areas of applied linguistics. With the fast pace of knowledge in different areas, communication becomes an essential need for human beings without which, a clear image of human life could not be manifested . To date, several scholars have made efforts in order to conceptualize new teaching methods, as well as to boost the existing ones. Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) and Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) are only two examples of such methods (Brown, 2000).

Having a clear image about learners' strategy use has always been among the interests of researchers. These learning strategies gain more importance once they are investigated and reviewed from the learners' points of view, rather than being investigated from researchers' work (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). However, the literature on Omani students' learning strategies reveals no significant empirical investigations. Therefore, the present work was conducted with main foci on investigating the learners' strategy use with special reference to independent learning hours utilization. The present study aimed at finding suitable answers to the following questions:

1) Based on Jiang and Smith's (2009) classification of learning strategies, what are the most frequent types of language learning strategies utilized by Omani undergraduate students during their independent learning hours with insights from their respective generations?

2) Are the differences among students' learning strategies from various generations statistically significant?

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Some researchers (e.g. Knecht et al., 2000) have hypothesized that left-handed students might have a better performance as compared to those who are right-handed. In this regard, Mehrdad and Ahghar (2012) focused on investigating the significance of such differences with special reference to the learning styles of students. In other words, learning strategies of EFL students were investigated. In order to collect the data, some questionnaires were distributed among 100 EFL students (e.g., Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, and VAK Learning Styles Indicator). Findings of the study showed no significant difference in brain dominance among left-handed students, as compared to those right-handed ones. However, the differences among the groups on specific perspectives of learning styles, along with the learning strategies were observed to be significant.

The learning strategies of students could have a positive relationship with their learning outputs (Brown, 2000). Based on this hypothesis, Sri Lengkanawati (2004) aimed at investigating as to how learners from various cultural

backgrounds would actually learn a foreign language. In other words, utilization of learning strategies was aimed to be investigated.   In doing so, 56 students at two universities in Australia along with 114 EFL students in a university in Indonesia were selected as samples of the study. Findings revealed some traces of the variety in the level of strategy use by both groups of participants. Findings also revealed that memory, meta-cognitive, and, affective strategies were among those strategies which were more frequently utilized by EFL participants of the study in Indonesia, as compared to those in Australia. On the other hand, cognitive, compensation, and, social learning strategies were observed to have higher frequencies of occurrence in Australia, as compared to Indonesia. Finally, findings pointed out differences in language learning strategies as a probable outcome of varieties in learning culture.

In another empirical work, Riazi (2007) reviewed the styles of language learning among 120 female English students at a university in Qatar. Participants were Arab-speakers. Ratio of the usage of strategies was calculated through a questionnaire. Findings of the study revealed that participants featured medium bordering on high strategy users with the total mean of 3.46 out of 5. Similarly, learning strategy styles were used in the order of meta-cognitive, cognitive, compensation, social, memory, and affective. In addition, based on the findings of the study, freshmen students were observed to hold the highest rate of strategy use with a mean of 3.64. Findings did not show any statistically significant differences between the four educational levels regarding the use of strategy styles, except for compensation strategies.

Another study was carried out by Griffiths (2003). This study was conducted in a private school of language based in Auckland, New Zealand. Griffiths (2003) aimed to investigate the relationship among course level on the one hand, and the reported frequency of language learning strategy use by speakers of other languages on the other. Findings of the study revealed a significant relationship among these two factors. The researcher then conceptualized different strategy types. These included strategies relating to interaction with others, to vocabulary, to reading, to the tolerance of ambiguity, to language systems, to the management of feelings, to the management of learning, and to the utilization of available resources, etc.

III.   METHOD

3.1. The Instrument

An author-designed questionnaire formed the instrument of the study. This questionnaire aimed at identifying the participants' age, gender, generation, as well as the year

they started to learn English as a foreign Language. The questionnaire was designed based on Jiang and Smith's (2009) learning strategies framework. Reliability of the instrument was measured through Cronbach alpha's formula, which was observed to be highly reliable (R= 0.875) (Cohen et al., 2007).

3.2. Participants

12 Omani undergraduate students (6 males and 6 females) formed the participants of the study. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling, as their age and the year they began learning English as a foreign language would matter. Subjects were selected from those studying at the International Foundation Program (IFP), Gulf College, Muscat, Oman. Participants were then classified under three main categories, each representing a generation. Table 1. tends to elaborate on this classification:

Table 1. How the participants were Categorized Under Each Generation

Generation Code	Age Range
1	18-28
2	29-38
3	39-48

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire was distributed among the participants of the study. Instructions on how to deal with the instrument were provided to the participants in advance. Participants were supposed to answer the questions within 15 minutes. The instrument focused on how participants learnt English as a foreign language. In order to motivate the participants in providing additional data, relatively open questions were deployed, as suggested by Cohen (2004) and Wengraf (2001).

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were collected and analyzed through the 16th version of SPSS. In search for statistically significant differences among the frequencies of strategies deployed by different generation of participants, the chi-square procedure was used. Although the sample size seems to be low due to manageability factor, sufficient data were taken from the participants. The present work was more of a qualitative nature; therefore, the researcher made use of tables and figures in order to explain the results of the study.

IV.   RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Having distributed the questionnaire among the participants, the data were collected. To begin with, some basic information on the participants of the study is presented in Table 2., as follows:

Table 2 An Overview on the Data Obtained From the Participants

Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Age	46	43	45	39	29	35	32	28	23	21	20	19
Generation	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3
Gender	M	M	F	F	F	M	M	F	F	M	M	F
Year Began Learning English	1986	1989	1987	1992	2000	1999	2001	2002	2007	2009	2008	2010

Similarly, Table 3. represents the frequencies of learning strategy usages by the participants of study. In this table, the participants were asked to choose the learning strategies which they use frequently in order to learn English during their independent learning hours at home.

Table 3. Frequencies of Learning Strategy Use

Strategy Code	Participant Number

Strategy Code	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
1	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	12
2		*		*			*		*	*		*	6
3	*		*		*			*			*		5
4		*				*			*				3
5	*	*	*			*		*		*	*	*	8
Total	3	4	3	2	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	

Table 4. Some Basic Statistical Information on the Frequencies of Learning Strategies

Strategy Code	Strategy Definition	Observed Frequency	Expected Frequency	Residual
1	Memorization and Rote Learning	12	7	5
2	Understanding and Memorization	6	7	-1
3	Memorization and the Need for Review	5	7	-2
4	Word Association and Memorization	3	7	-4
5	Use of Local Pronunciation and Memorization	8	7	1
Total		34		

Below are the descriptions and definitions related to each of the learning strategies provided by Jiang and Smith (2009):

1) **Memorization and Rote Learning:** In which the learners conduct a rote learning (learning through mere repetition) to learn the materials needed (Jiang & Smith, 2009). Findings of the study revealed that all 12 participants used this strategy during their independent learning hours at home (f= 12). This strategy was found to be the most frequent one among the other four learning strategies presented by Jiang and Smith (2009).

2) **Understanding and Memorization:** In which the learner first tries to understand the materials being taught to them. Then, the learners memorize the materials in most appropriate procedure (Jiang & Smith, 2009). Findings revealed that half of the participants (f= 6) used this learning strategy during their independent learning hours.

3) **Memorization and the Need for Review:** In which the learner first tries to memorize the materials being taught and then tends to reinforce those materials through reviewing them (Jiang & Smith, 2009). Less than %50 of the participants marked this strategy useful (f= 5).

4) **Word Association and Memorization**: Accordingly, some of the participants mentioned word association and memorization as a dominant technique to learn English as a foreign language. These could include learning English through using word prefixes and suffixes, or synonyms and antonyms, the strategies which they could either learned from reference books or their teachers (Jiang & Smith, 2009). Based on the findings of the study, this strategy was found to be the least frequent (f= 3) among other learning strategies presented by Jiang and Smith (2009).

5) **Use of Local Pronunciation and Memorization:** The fifth learning strategy pointed out by Jiang and Smith (2009) was the use of local pronunciation and memorization. This strategy was observed to be the second most frequent strategy (f= 8) utilized by the participants of the study.

In search for statistical significance differences among the frequencies of learning strategies utilized by Omani undergraduate students during their independent learning hours, the chi-square procedure was applied. To begin with, Table 4. Provides some basic statistical information on the data:

Accordingly, Table 5. Shows the results of the chi-square test among the frequencies of the learning strategies:

Table 5. Result of the Chi-Square Test Among the Frequencies of the Learning Strategies

Chi-Square	7.143
df	4
Asymp. Sig.	0.1285

Based on the findings of the chi-square test, the differences among the frequencies of learning strategies were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). In other words, participants of the study did not make use of certain learning strategies during their independent learning hours.

V.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first research question of the study aimed at investigating the most frequent types of learning strategy used by Omani undergraduate students and utilized during their independent learning hours. Based on the finding of the study, the first strategy presented by Jiang and Smith (2009) (i.e., memorization and rote learning) was observed to be the most frequent type of learning strategy used by all participants. Finding of the study supported the results provided by Jiang and Smith (2009), in which the researchers claimed that a better understanding of Chinese learners' strategy use could be achieved through accessing their own voices, as well as analyzing findings in relation to context.

In fact, findings of the study conducted by Jiang and Smith (2009) confirmed that memorization was a popular learning strategy for many EFL learners in the world. However, the application of this strategy would be somehow diverse and complex. According to Jiang and Smith (2009), the type of language policy used by authorities such as curriculum designers and teachers as well as the related pedagogy used in the teaching context could have a significant impact on the over-use of this learning strategy.

The second research question aimed at searching for statistical significant differences among the frequencies of learning strategies utilized by participants of study during their independent learning hours. Based on the finding of the study, there were no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) among the frequencies of learning strategies presented by Jiang and Smith (2009).

Findings revealed that memorization and rote learning (f= 12) was the most frequent type of learning strategy among the participants. Similarly, use of local pronunciation and memorization (f= 8) was observed to be the second most-frequent type of strategy used by the participants. The present work was conducted with a cross-generational nature. In fact, participants of the study were selected from three different generations. Each of the generations was then a representative of a certain decade. This means that these two learning strategies have not lost their populations over time.

Based on the additional information and descriptions provided by the participants of the study, memorization and rote learning on the one hand, and, use of local pronunciation and memorization on the other are mostly useful in dealing with terms such as English vocabularies. In addition, a great deal of reinforcement could be achieved by utilizing these learning strategies.

All in all, several empirical studies have been conducted to review different types of learning strategies utilized by EFL learners in the world (e.g., Jiang & Smith 2009, Riazi 2007, Sri Lengkanawati 2004, Ralph Grainger 1997, etc.). It is important to mention that understanding the use of language learning strategies from their own points of view, rather than according to researchers' preconceptions would be an essential task for manifestation of appropriate research and pedagogy.

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