A Closer Look at Gender and Arabic Language Learning Strategies Use

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Abstract
Numerous studies have discerned gender differences in language learning strategies (LLS) use. In most of the studies in which gender differences emerged, the results showed that female reported using language learning strategies more often than males. However, some studies demonstrated that there was no statistically significant difference between gender in the use of LLS. Others showed that male students use more LLS than female students in certain categories. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not differences exist between female and male Arabic students in the use of language learning strategies. A total of 457 students at thirteen secondary schools in Terengganu, Malaysia participated in this study. Data was collected by using a questionnaire adapted and modified from SILL (Oxford 1990). The finding from this study were: 1) there was significant gender difference in the use of language learning strategies as a whole. Female students tend to use overall language learning strategies more often than males. 2) as to categories of language learning strategies, there are significant differences between genders in the use of affective and metaphysic strategies with females using them more often.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategy, Gender, Arabic Language.

1. Introduction
In general, language learning strategy (LLS) is specific steps or actions taken by the learner to facilitate acquisition, retention, retrieval and performance (Rigney, 1978) which make the learning become easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990). It’s involved the mental and communicative procedures learners use in order
to learn and use language (Nunan, 1999). From the definition, it is clear that strategies are an important part of language learning. Some of these strategies are carried out individually but some will involve the participant of other people.

Language learning strategy have been found to correlate with language proficiency and performance (Bialystok, 1981; Huang & Van Naeressen, 1987; Kamarul Shukri et al., 2008; O’Malley et al., 1985; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). Therefore, most educators now accept the assumption that the use of learning strategies has become a guidepost for distinguishing high from low skilled learners (Brown et al., 1983). They have also begun to recognize the influence that learning strategy use may have on the acquisition of a second or foreign language (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Chamot, 1987; Cohen & Aphek, 1981; Hosenfeld, 1977; Wenden, 1991). They also acknowledge that students can be taught to learn the language if they are also taught the strategies that facilitate language acquisition.

In recent years, researchers have been identified key areas of individual differences that can influence the choice of LLS and the frequency of the use (Chang, 2003; Griffiths, 2003; Kamarul Shukri et al., 2009; Lan, 2005; Macaro, 2001; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975). Factors which have been found to influence the use of learning strategies are level of language proficiency, gender, age, motivation, cultural background, socioeconomic status, learning duration, and language being learned. Considering the fact that language learning strategies can enhance language achievement and that knowledge about these strategies may improve instruction, it is important to study how students from different/particular group use the learning strategies.

2. Previous Research

Gender differences have been found in many areas of human social and cognitive development. Studies indicated that females show more interest in social activities than males, females are less competitive and more cooperative than males (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Research studies also claim that females are better than males both in second and first language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Slavin, 1988). In language learning strategy research, many studies that cross different cultures show more frequent strategy use by females than males, especially the social-based strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Mohamed Amin, 2000; Politzer, 1983). However, some findings revealed that males employed more strategies than did females (Wharton, 2000; Zamri, 2004), and some even suggested that there were no significant differences between males and females on their use of language learning strategies (Chang, 1990; Chou, 2002).

Politser (1983) studied the learning strategies of 90 undergraduate foreign language students enrolled in French, Spanish and German courses in the U.S. and found that female students used social learning strategies more often than males. After studying the LLS used by more than 1,200 undergraduate university students, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) concluded that gender difference had a profound influence which indicates that females used strategies more frequently than males. The result of Green and Oxford’s (1995) study on 374 ESL/EFL showed that female students used memory, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies more frequently than male students. Chang (2003) investigated the use of LLS by a group of high school students in Taiwanese who were learning English. The study found that females significantly surpassed males in the use of LLS as a whole. The results also showed that females significantly used cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies more frequently than males. The results of Lan’s (2005) study of 1,191 Taiwanese elementary school students indicated a significant difference between boys and girls in the frequency of strategy use. Girls in this group reported significantly more strategy use than boys.

In the Malaysian context, Mohamed Amin (2000) conducted a study to investigate the LLS of 515 secondary school students learning English. The result of his study indicated that females reported using overall LLS more frequently than male students. The result also showed that females use more classroom strategies, out of classroom strategies, and exam language strategies than males. Punithavalli (2003) with 170 ESL students in Selangor found that female students used greater strategies in the classroom and out of classroom compared to the male students. The results did not show the significant
difference between male and female students in using learning strategies for their examination. The study conducted by Mohd Nazali (1999) to find out the use of LLS among the secondary school students who were learning Malay as a first language showed that female significantly surpassed males in their use of classroom strategies, and out of classroom strategies.

Oxford (1993: 83) summarizes the gender related LLS research in the following manner: Whenever strategy research has considered gender, it has usually demonstrated gender differences in strategy frequency, with females choosing to use particular sets of strategies more often than males. Females especially tended to use general study strategies, social strategies, affective strategies and certain conversational or functional practice strategies more frequently than males across a number of studies, usually showing a greater range of frequently used strategy categories.

However, gender differences are not necessarily universal. For instance, Tran’s (1988) study discovered that Vietnamese male immigrants to the U.S. used more strategies than did females. He claimed that employment situation may influence the use of strategies as well as gender. Wharton (2000) studied the learning strategies of 678 university students learning Japanese and French as foreign language in Singapore. Unexpectedly, the results showed more LLS used significantly by males. Wharton (2000) speculated that when the subjects were very experienced second language learners, gender difference in the use of strategies was not significant. Zamri’s (2004) study in Malaysia also reported a similar result, that male students used strategies more often than females when they were learning Malay language as a first language.

Bacon’s (1992) study investigated the strategies that learners used when listening to authentic second language texts of two levels of difficulty. She found that women reported using a significantly higher proportion of metacognitive strategies than did men. They were more likely to plan for the listening, monitor their comprehension and evaluate their strategy use than did men. On the other hand, men reported more bottom-up strategies than did women. Men also reported a significantly greater use of translation strategies than did women. They appeared to be in more favor of cognitive strategies than metacognitive strategies.

Some studies provided contradictory evidence regarding gender difference in language learning strategies use. In research on EFL students in Taiwan, Chou (2002) failed to find significant differences in the frequency of LLS use between male and female students. The results of al-Otaibi’s (2004) study of 237 Saudi students in an intensive English language program demonstrated that there were no statistically significant differences in the use any of the six strategy categories.

The findings presented above have provided rich insights into interpreting the gender issues in the studies of LLS. But, since the results are inconclusive regarding the effect of gender on LLS use, the further studies in different setting and learning conditions were recommended. It is important to replicate LLS studies in different context in order to avoid what Wharton (2000) calls “the dangers of an ethnocentric bias regarding the definition of good language learning strategies”. Beside that, most studies were done in ESL/EFL setting and only a few were undertaken in Arabic language learning context. Moreover, it is difficult to find the study described about the influence of gender on the LLS use of Arabic learners. Therefore, this study hopefully can provide in-depth information to lead to a better understanding of Arabic learners when they learn and use the language especially in Malaysia context.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Questions
This study attempts to answer the following questions:
1. What are there differences between male and female Arabic students in the use of language learning strategies as a whole?
2. What are there differences between male and female Arabic students in the use of seven categories of language learning strategies?
3.2 Hypotheses
Based on the research questions, this study was directed at testing the following null hypotheses:

Ho.1: There is no significant difference in the use of overall language learning strategy between male and female students.

Ho.2: There is no significant difference in the use of language learning strategy categories between male and female students.

3.3 Participants
The study was conducted at thirteen secondary schools in Terengganu. A total of 457 students were drawn from a population of Form 4 students (N=1691) who have been studying Arabic language. The sample is comprised of 230 females and 227 males who have been studying the Arabic language for more than three years.

3.4 Instrument
The instrument in this survey focused on two areas: background information and language learning strategy. The questionnaires were presented in the Malay language to ensure that possible failure to understand the instruction or questions would not affect the response. The language learning strategies questionnaire was adopted from version 7.0 of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990). In this study, the questionnaire consisted of 60 items, with the introduction of one construct and some changes to the original SILL version. In addition to the six strategy categories (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social, and affective), we introduce a new category: metaphysic strategy.

Table 1: Internal Consistency Reliability of LLS Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Alpha Cronbach</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory Strategies</td>
<td>0.827</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Strategies</td>
<td>0.869</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation Strategies</td>
<td>0.808</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Strategies</td>
<td>0.859</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Strategies</td>
<td>0.650</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Strategies</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphysic Strategies</td>
<td>0.805</td>
<td>08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall LLS Items</td>
<td><strong>0.954</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 summarizes the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of internal consistency for each category of the LLS questionnaires. The Cronbach’s alpha for each category and for the entire questionnaire ranges from 0.65 to 0.954: this indicates a good degree of reliability (Sekaran, 1992; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

4. Data Analysis
In order to answer the research questions, a one-way MANOVA was performed to identify any significant differences in the use of language learning strategies between male and female learners. Preliminary assumption analyses were conducted to check for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and multicollinearity (Bryman & Cramer, 2005; Coakes, 2005; Field, 2005; Pallant, 2001), with no serious violations noted.

As can be seen on Table 2, the multivariate test of significance reveal that there are significant differences in the dependent variables across gender: Wilks’ Lambda = 0.954, partial eta squared = 0.046, F (7,449) = 3.122, Sig. = 0.003 (p < 0.05). The results indicate that there were significant
differences in the use of LLS as a whole among Arabic language learners with different gender. The data provides strong evidence to reject the first null hypothesis which posits that there is no significant differences in the use of the overall LLS between male and female Arabic learners.

**Table 2: The Effect of Gender on Overall LLS Use (N = 457)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Wilks' Lambda Value</th>
<th>F Value</th>
<th>D.F. Between Groups</th>
<th>D.F. Within Groups</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.954</td>
<td>3.122</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sig. at the 0.05 level

The results of univariate/between-subjects tests for each dependent variable (as summarizes in Table 3) indicates that affective and metaphysic strategies are variables that differ significantly across gender when significance is measured at an alpha level of 0.05: F (1,455) = 11.386, Sig. = 0.001 < 0.05, partial eta squared = 0.024 in affective strategies, and F (1,455) = 8.418, Sig. = 0.004 < 0.05, partial eta squared = 0.018 in metaphysic strategies. Therefore, the second null hypothesis which posits that there are no significant differences in the use of the language learning strategy categories between male and female Arabic learners is rejected. Statistically significant differences were found between male and female Arabic learners in the use of affective and metaphysic strategies. No statistically significant differences were found between male and female students in the use of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategy categories.

**Table 3: The Effect of Gender on Categories of LLS Use (N = 457)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>D.F.</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F Value</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>1.089</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.089</td>
<td>3.132</td>
<td>0.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>0.206</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.206</td>
<td>0.562</td>
<td>0.454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>7.870E-07</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.870E-07</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>0.834</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.834</td>
<td>1.878</td>
<td>0.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>5.037</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.037</td>
<td>11.386</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>1.276</td>
<td>0.259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metaphysic</td>
<td>4.307</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.307</td>
<td>8.418</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sig. at the 0.05 level

Although we know that male and female are differed in the using of affective and metaphysic strategies, we do not know who had the higher scores. To find this out we refer to the estimated marginal means (as shown in Table 4). The examination of the means for the variables reveal that female have significantly higher affective scores (M = 2.493) than males (M = 2.283), and higher metaphysic scores (M = 2.767) than those of males (M = 2.573).

**Table 4: Comparison of Strategy Category Use by Gender (N = 457)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.948</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>1.871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.045</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>1.969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.030</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>1.951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.072</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>1.994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.716</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>2.598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.716</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>2.599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.004</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>1.917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.090</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.283</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>2.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.493</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.041</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>1.948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.117</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphysic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.573</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>2.480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.767</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.675</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Results and Discussion
The finding of the relationship between gender and strategy use in the current study was consistent with previous studies (examples: Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Mohamed Amin, 2000; Mohd Nazali, 1999; Punithavalli, 2003) in which female students tended to use overall language learning strategies more frequently than male students. Green and Oxford (1995) concluded that the effect of the use of LLS attributed to gender difference might refer to biological and socialization related causes. As suggested by Oxford (1989), the gender difference may have been associated with women’s greater social orientation, stronger verbal skills, and greater conformity to norms, both linguistic and academic. Evidence from this study also supports the conclusion of second language acquisition studies that females are better than males both in second and first language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Slavin, 1988).

Female students also reported a greater use of affective and metaphysic strategies than male students. This result was supported by Hashim and Sahil (1994) study which showed that Malaysian female preferred affective strategies significantly more than did males. One explanation for this finding might relate to the theories of psychology which mention that sensitivity, empathy, nurturance and emotion are strong female traits, whereas aggression, dominance, assertiveness and emotional inexpressiveness are male traits (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). So, these psychological traits of males and females give influence on LLS use.

6. Summary and Concluding Remarks
The study proved that gender has been a classic and significant predictor in the fields of education, psychology and linguistics research. Therefore, teacher should recognize the range of factors affecting strategy use among their students. For example, this study showed that females might differ from males in their strategy choices and uses. The identification of LLS based on such factor can provide a useful guidance for students to come closer to successful language learners.

Teacher should raise students’ awareness about LLS and their usefulness. Greater student awareness about LLS can help them to become more self confident and successful language learners. Students should be made aware that a wider repertoire of LLS and higher frequency of their use are both critical in learning language effectively. Therefore, teachers should also encourage their students not only to profit from strategies that they are already using, but also to expand their range of LLS. In order to lead students to employ those strategies, language teachers need to create an input-rich environment inside and outside the classroom. For instance, they should engage their students in a variety of communicative activities. Thus, the role of a teacher should be adjusted to that as a facilitator which encourages students’ active participation in the teaching and learning process.

References


