

**LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY PREFERENCES OF TURKISH STUDENTS**

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**Abstract**

A learning style is a preferred way of acquiring knowledge and processing information. Learning styles may differ depending on gender, age, or culture. Niles (1995) in his study “Cultural Differences in Learning Motivation and Learning Strategies” studied the cultural impact on learning strategies and found considerable differences between culturally different students.

Providing evidence for the relationship between culture and learning strategy preference and use, this study aims at examining the use and preference of language learning strategies of Turkish students while they are learning English.

**Keywords:** learning strategies, language learning strategies, strategy use, learning style

**Özet**

Öğrenme üslubu bilgiyi edinmek ve işlemek için tercih edilen bir yoldur. Öğrenme üslupları cinsiyete, yaşa ve kültüre bağlı olarak değişiklikler gösterebilmektedir. Niles (1995) “Öğrenme Güdülenmesi ve Öğrenme Stratejilerindeki Kültürel Farklılıklar” isimli çalışmasında kültürün öğrenme stratejileri üzerindeki etkilerini çalışmış ve farklı kültürlerden olan öğrenciler arasında dikkate değer farklılıklar bulmuştur.

Bu çalışma kültür ve öğrenme stratejilerinin seçimi ve kullanımı arasındaki ilişkilerle ilgili veriler ışığında, Türk öğrencilerin İngilizce öğrenirken kullandıkları dil öğrenme stratejilerini tercih ve kullanımlarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

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**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Öğrenme stratejileri, dil öğrenme stratejileri, strateji kullanımı, öğrenme tipi

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning strategies have been in the centre of attention and they have gained great importance in the teaching-learning process. Oxford (1990:8) defines learning strategies as the specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations.

Oxford (1990:14-22) describes language learning strategies more comprehensively using a new system. In her study, strategies are divided into two major classes: direct and indirect and which are also subdivided into six sub-groups (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social). In Oxford (1990:37-56), language learning strategies that directly involve the target language are called direct strategies and all direct strategies require mental processing of the language, but the three groups of strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation) do this processing differently and for different purposes. Memory strategies help students store and retrieve new information while cognitive strategies enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means. Compensation strategies, on the other hand, allow learners to use the language despite their gaps in knowledge.

Besides the direct strategies, Oxford (1990:135-150) describes the indirect strategies that underpin the business of language learning. In her study, indirect strategies are divided as metacognitive, affective, and social. Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition; affective strategies help to regulate emotions, motivations and attitudes. Social strategies help students learn through interactions with others. These strategies are called “indirect” as they support language learning without directly involving the target language. Indirect strategies like the direct ones are applicable to all four language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing.

Cultural background is one of the factors that might influence strategy choice. In his study, Green (1991) used the SILL 7.0 ( Strategies Inventory of Language Learning) with 213 students of English at the University of Puerto Rico and the subjects showed high use of metacognitive strategies and medium use of social, cognitive, compensation, affective and memory strategies whereas the study of Toubia (1992) showed that Egyptian university students highly use metacognitive and memory strategies and poorly use cognitive strategies (Oxford 1996:49). For example, many Hispanic ESL/EFL students choose inferring, avoiding details, working with others rather than alone. In contrast, many Japanese ESL/EFL students

use analytic strategies aimed at precision and accuracy, search for small details and work alone (Reid in Oxford 1996,xi).

### **The Question of the Study**

The focus of this study was directed primarily on the language learning strategy choices of Turkish students. The study aims to detect what language learning strategies Turkish students apply while they are learning English.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The research was carried out by using the descriptive research model and data were collected by means of the SILL questionnaire (Strategies Inventory of Language Learning) (presented in Appendix A) by Rebecca Oxford. The questionnaire was conducted on the learners of English as a foreign language. The fifty participants for the research were selected randomly among the third year students studying English as a foreign language at the ELT department of Gazi University. The SILL questionnaire was conducted by the lecturers who had already been informed about the function, steps and the conduction of the questionnaire beforehand.

## **3. THE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA**

The answers to the questions were scored from (1) Never or almost never true of me to (5) Always or almost always true of me. The answers were scored by using the following numbers for the chosen items:

- 1 point Never or almost never true of me
- 2 points Usually not true of me
- 3 points Somewhat true of me
- 4 points Usually true of me
- 5 points Always or almost always true of me

The averages of the results were listed below from the most frequently preferred strategies to the least frequently preferred ones in each group:

**Table 1:** Part A- Memory Strategies

	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>f (frequency)</b>
<b>1</b>	I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	4
<b>4</b>	I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	4
<b>3</b>	I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	4
<b>9</b>	I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	4
<b>2</b>	I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	3
<b>8</b>	I review English lessons often.	3
<b>5</b>	I use rhymes to remember new English words.	2
<b>6</b>	I use flashcards to remember new English words.	2
<b>7</b>	I physically act out new English words.	2

**Table 2:** Part B-Cognitive Strategies

	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>f (frequency)</b>
<b>12</b>	I practice the sounds in English.	4
<b>14</b>	I start conversations in English.	4
<b>15</b>	I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English	4
<b>18</b>	I first skim an English passage then go back and read carefully.	4
<b>22</b>	I try not to translate word-for word.	4
<b>11</b>	I try to talk like native English speakers.	3
<b>13</b>	I use the English words I know in different ways.	3
<b>16</b>	I read for pleasure in English.	3
<b>17</b>	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports by dividing it into parts that I understand.	3
<b>23</b>	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	3
<b>10</b>	I say or write new English words several times.	2

**Table 3:** Part C-Compensation Strategies

	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>f (frequency)</b>
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24	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	4
25	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	4
27	I read English without looking up every new word.	4
28	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	4
29	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing .	4
26	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	3

**Table 4:** Part D-Metacognitive Strategies

	Strategy	f (frequency)
31	I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	4
32	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	4
33	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	4
36	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	4
37	I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	4
38	I think about my progress in learning English.	4
30	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	3
34	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	3
35	I look for people I can talk to in English.	3

**Table 5:** Part E-Affective Strategies

	Strategy	f (frequency)
39	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	4
40	I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	4
41	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	3
42	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	3
43	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	3
44	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	3

**Table 6:** Part F-Social Strategies

	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>f (frequency)</b>
<b>45</b>	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	4
<b>46</b>	I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	4
<b>47</b>	I practice English with other students.	4
<b>48</b>	I ask for help from English speakers.	3
<b>50</b>	I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	3
<b>49</b>	I ask questions in English.	2

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The following findings can be stated as a result of the data analysis:

The participants of the study showed high (3.5 +) use of compensation and metacognitive strategies, and medium (2.5-3.5) use of memory, cognitive, affective and social strategies.

In Part A, the answers show that the participants apply all the strategies at different levels of frequency to remember more effectively. They usually connect the new information to what they already know, make use of mental pictures and locations of the new words to remember them. Strategies in items 5, 6 and 7 are the least frequently preferred strategies; they seldom prefer to use rhymes and flashcards to remember new English words and they do not physically act out new English words.

In Part B, the results signify that strategies in items 12, 14, 15, 18 and 22 are the most preferred ones while the strategy in item 10 is not applied at all. They practice the sounds in English, start conversations in English, watch English language TV shows or go to movies spoken in English, first skim an English passage then go back and read carefully, and try not to translate word-for-word. The participants rarely say or write new English words several times while they are learning English.

The answers to Part C reveal that the participants use each strategy to compensate for missing knowledge almost at the same frequency level. They make guesses to understand unfamiliar English words, use gestures, read English without looking up every new word, try to guess what the other person will say next in English, and use the synonyms of the words they cannot think of.

The answers of the participants for the questions in Part D show that they apply all the strategies to organize and evaluate their learning frequently. Strategies in items 31, 32, 33, 36,

37, and 38 are the most frequently applied ones in this section. They notice their English mistakes and correct them, pay attention when someone is speaking English, try to be better learners of English, look for opportunities to read in English as much as possible, have clear goals for improving their English skills and think about their progress in English.

In Part E, the results suggest that strategies in item 39 and 40 are the most frequently preferred strategies to manage emotions: They try to relax or encourage themselves when they are afraid of using English. The other strategies in the group are applied less often.

In Part F, the questions are designed to test the ability of using strategies to learn with others. The analysis of the data reveals that participants mostly prefer strategies in items 45, 46 and 47; they ask the other person to slow down or say it again, ask for correction and practice English with other students. In this section, the answers of the participants show that they do not use strategy in item 49 at all: They do not ask questions in English.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In the light of the findings, an overall evaluation of the use of six groups of strategies by the participants can be made. The answers of the participants reveal that they use the strategies to compensate for missing knowledge (Part C) and organizing and evaluating their learning (Part D) more frequently than the strategies for remembering more effectively (Part A), using all their mental process (Part B), managing their emotions (Part E) and learning with others (Part F).

#### **5. SUGGESTIONS**

In the light of the study, the following suggestions can be made in order to improve the strategy preference and use of the learners:

1-The language learning strategies in general should be taught to language learners so that they can better exploit them while they are learning a language.

2-The data analysis of the study revealed that the participants of this study use the strategies to compensate for missing knowledge and to organize and evaluate their learning more frequently than the other strategies. The other four groups of strategies to remember more effectively, to use all mental processes, to manage emotions, and to learn with others should also be applied frequently by the participants to improve

language learning. That's why, a detailed teaching and implementation of these strategies may be conducted in the language classroom.

3-It is advisable for each language teacher to detect the language learning strategies of their students and help them compensate the missing areas in their strategy preference and use.

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## APPENDIX-A

### Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) , from R.Oxford, 1989

Please read each statement . On the separate Worksheet, write the response(1,2,3,4 or 5) that tells HOW TRUE OF YOU THE STATEMENT IS.

- 1- Never or almost never true of me
- 2- Usually not true of me
- 3- Somewhat true of me
- 4- Usually true of me
- 5- Always or almost always true of me

#### PART A

1. I think of relationships between when I already know and new things I learn in English.
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.
7. I physically act out new English words.
8. I review English lessons often.
9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.

#### PART B

10. I say or write new English words several times.
11. I try to talk like native English speakers.
12. I practise the sounds of English.
13. I use the English words I know in different ways.
14. I start conversations in English

15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.
16. I read for pleasure in English
17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.
18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.
19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.
20. I try to find patterns in English.
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing into parts that I understand.
22. I try not to translate word-for-word.
23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.

#### PART C

24. To understand unfamiliar words, I make guesses.
25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.
27. I read English without looking up every new word.
28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.
29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

#### PART D

30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.
31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me to do better.
32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.
34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
35. I look for people I can talk to in English.
36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.
38. I think about my progress in learning English.

#### PART E

39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.
41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.

44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.

**PART F**

45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again

46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.

47. I practise English with other students.

48. I ask for help from English speakers.

49. I ask questions in English.

50. I try to learn about culture of English speakers.