

Cross-Cultural Differences in Language Learning Strategy Preferences: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Having plenty of evidence about the effect of culture on language learning strategy use in hand, the present study aims to compare the language learning strategy choice of students from three different cultural backgrounds: Jordanian, Spanish and Turkish university students studying English as a foreign language in their native countries. The research was carried out by employing the comparative-descriptive research model and data were collected by means of the SILL Questionnaire 7.0 (Strategies Inventory of Language Learning) by Rebecca Oxford and a semi-structured interview designed by the researcher. The questionnaire was conducted on 55 students and in order to analyze the collected data and a variety of tests were employed to analyze the collected data. The three groups of students have shown some differences in strategy use both in general strategy groups and individual strategies. The Jordanian and the Turkish participants use memory strategies and affective strategies at a higher rate than the Spanish participants and the Jordanians show higher use of social strategies than the Turkish participants in order to learn English. The present study tried to investigate the differences in language learning strategy choice and the cultural reasons behind them and came up with some specific findings.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural differences, learning strategies, language learning strategies, strategy use, strategy choice*

Introduction

Learning strategies have been in the centre of attention and they have gained great importance in the teaching-learning environment. Oxford (1990) 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. According to O' Malley and Chamot (1999) learning strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retrain new information" (p.1).

Research demonstrated that students apply learning strategies while learning a second language. Rubin (1981) classifies language learning strategies into two primary groups as strategies that directly affect learning and strategies that contribute indirectly to learning. O' Malley et al. (1985) group second language acquisition strategies into three categories: meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. Oxford (1990) groups language learning strategies under two major classes: direct and indirect and which are also subdivided into six sub-groups (memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective, and social). In her study, language learning strategies that directly involve the target language are called direct strategies and all direct strategies require mental processing of the language. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, are grouped as meta-cognitive, affective, and social. These strategies are called "indirect" as they support language learning without directly involving the target language.

The functions of direct and indirect strategies are also well described. Memory strategies help students store and retrieve new information while cognitive strategies enable learners to understand and produce new language. Compensation strategies, on the other hand, allow learners to use the language despite their gaps in knowledge. Meta-cognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition while affective strategies help to regulate emotions, motivations and attitudes. Social strategies are the ones help students learn through interactions with others (Oxford, 1990)

The language learning strategies defined above are employed in various ways and at different rates depending on some factors such as individual and cultural features of the language learner. Research revealed that cultural background affects strategy choice and people from different cultures learn in different ways. For example, many Hispanic ESL/EFL students choose particular learning strategies, such as predicting, 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, work alone (Reid in Oxford 1991, xi). Culture clearly includes beliefs, perceptions, and values which affect language learning, including general learning styles and specific learning strategies (Yang, 1992).

Some SILL studies of ESL/EFL strategies were conducted on different cultures to investigate the cultural differences in language learning strategy choice. Politzer and McGrogarty (1985) found in their study that Hispanic students used the various strategy categories under investigation more frequently than their Asian counterparts. Green (as cited in Oxford, 1996) used the SILL 7.0 with 213 participants at the University of Puerto Rico and the subjects showed high use of meta-cognitive strategies and medium use of social, cognitive, compensation, effective, and memory strategies. The study of Toubia 1992 (as cited in Oxford, 1991) revealed that Egyptian university students highly use meta-cognitive and memory strategies and poorly use cognitive strategies. Niles (1995) studied the learning strategies of Australian and Asian students at an Australian university and found out that two of the groups have some similarities and differences in terms of their learning strategies. Griffiths (as cited in Cohen & Macaro, 2007) reported that European students used SILL strategies more frequently than did students from other backgrounds. Lee and Oxford (2008) worked on Korean EFL learners' English learning strategies and they found out that Korean participants were using different kinds of memory strategies from those defined in the SILL; they applied some specific memory strategies.

With the guidance of valuable evidence about the effect of culture on language learning strategy use, the present study aims to compare the language learning strategy choice of EFL students from three different cultural backgrounds.

Method

The research was carried out by employing the comparative- descriptive research model and data were collected by means of the SILL Questionnaire 7.0 (Strategies Inventory of Language Learning) by Rebecca Oxford. The SILL questionnaire was conducted by the lecturers who had already been informed about the functions, steps and the conduction of the questionnaire beforehand. They were administered in classrooms in March 2008. After the analysis of the questionnaires, the subjects were interviewed to find the reasoning behind their specific strategy choice and their English teachers were also consulted to gather further data about the cultural issues.

The questionnaire was conducted on 55 second year university students studying English as a foreign language in their native countries: 16 students studying at the university of Vigo, Spain; 20 students studying at the private university of Al Zaytoonah in Jordan and 19 students studying at Gazi University, Turkey. The subjects were chosen among the second year university students studying English as a foreign language in the same class. The students chosen for the study were not imposed to any other cultures except for their own. The groups were similar in number, age, their fields of study and their levels of English. The participants were classified as B2 level students on the basis of the common European framework of reference for languages. English was the medium of instruction in the departments where the subjects studied. After the analysis of the questionnaires, the subjects were interviewed by their teachers in order to find out the possible reasons behind their choice of particular strategies and their English teachers were also consulted by the researcher in order to better investigate the differences in strategy choice of the groups.

In order to analyze the collected data, several tests were employed. First, score averages of the groups were measured to find the differences in individual strategy items. Then, Kruskal Wallis test was conducted and Chi-square analysis was performed to investigate the significant differences among the six general strategy categories. Besides, Mann Whitney U test was computed to determine which groups show differences in score order averages. Any possible effect of gender on the language learning strategy choice was measured with an unpaired t-test. For the statistical analyses of the data collected, the SPSS 15.0 was used and the level of significance was set at .05.

Findings and results

The age average of the groups is 21. No significant difference in the age average of the three groups can be found: Spain:21; Turkey 21 and Jordan: 21.5. The item averages for the whole group and each of the countries were measured and the results are given in Table 1.

Cronbach's alpha for internal reliability of the questionnaire was measured 0,77 for sub-test A; 0,83 for sub-test B; 0,61 for sub-test C; 0,79 for sub-test D; 0,53 for sub-test E; and 0,64 for sub-test F. The reliability levels of the sub-tests A, B, D are considered reliable at medium level and for C, E, F are considered acceptable but reliable at low level. The low reliability of the sub-tests C,E,F may be stemming from the fewer number of the questions in the tests.

Table 1. The Item Averages for the Whole Group and Each of the Countries

	All the Countries	Spain	Jordan	Turkey
<u>Sub-test A: Memory Strategies</u>				
A1- I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English	3,36	3,00	3,40	3,63
A2- I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them	3,15	2,63	3,60	3,11
A3- I connect the sound of a new English word and image or picture of the word to help me remember the word	3,09	2,50	2,85	3,84
A4- I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used	3,36	2,81	3,30	3,89
A5- I use rhymes to remember new English words	2,31	1,50	2,40	2,89
A6- I use flashcards to remember new English words	2,22	1,31	2,20	3,00
A7- I physically act out new English words	2,27	1,56	2,40	2,74
A8- I review English lessons often	2,96	2,44	3,25	3,11
A9- I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign	3,56	2,88	3,85	3,84
<u>Sub-test B: Cognitive Strategies</u>				
B1- I say or write new English words several times	3,20	2,81	4,30	2,37
B2- I try to talk like native English speakers	3,49	3,50	3,65	3,32
B3- I practice the sounds of English	3,55	3,50	3,55	3,58
B4- I use the English words I know in different Ways	3,56	3,38	4,05	3,21
B5- I start conversations in English	3,62	2,94	3,95	3,84
B6- I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English	4,05	3,94	4,20	4,00
B7- I read for pleasure in English	3,38	2,94	3,60	3,53
B8- I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English	3,44	3,19	3,70	3,37
B9- I first skim an English passage then go back and read carefully	3,55	3,00	3,80	3,74
B10- I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English	3,45	3,56	3,40	3,42
B11- I try to find patterns in English	3,36	3,25	3,50	3,32
B12- I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand	2,91	2,38	3,40	2,84

B13- I try not to translate word-for-word	3,38	3,75	2,90	3,58
B14- I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English	3,00	1,94	3,40	3,47

Sub-test C: Compensation Strategies

C1- To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses	3,51	3,13	3,35	4,00
C2- When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures	3,36	3,13	3,25	3,68
C3- I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English	2,85	2,25	3,15	3,05
C4- I read English without looking up every new Word	3,56	3,69	3,05	4,00
C5- I try to guess what the other person will say next in English	3,44	3,38	3,30	3,63
C6- If I cannot think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing	4,15	3,88	4,20	4,32

Sub-test D: Metacognitive Strategies

D1- I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English	3,58	3,56	3,75	3,42
D2- I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better	3,85	3,50	4,10	3,89
D3- I pay attention when someone is speaking English	4,22	4,50	3,90	4,32
D4- I try to find out how to be a better learner of English	4,05	3,94	4,10	4,11
D5- I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English	2,87	2,38	3,35	2,79
D6- I look for people I can talk to in English	3,29	3,00	3,55	3,26
D7- I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English	3,51	3,31	3,60	3,58
D8- I have clear goals for improving my English skills	3,67	3,69	3,65	3,68
D9- I think about my progress in learning English	3,89	3,94	3,95	3,79

Sub-test E: Affective Strategies

E1- I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English	3,35	3,00	3,45	3,53
E2- I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake	3,55	3,19	3,80	3,58
E3- I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English	3,02	2,31	3,15	3,47
E4- I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English	3,22	3,75	2,65	3,37
E5- I write down my feelings in a language learning diary	2,18	1,44	3,05	1,89
E6- I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English	2,56	2,06	2,75	2,79

Sub-test F: Social Strategies

F1- If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again	3,95	4,00	3,90	3,95
F2- I ask English speakers to correct me when I	3,22	3,44	3,35	2,89

talk				
F3- I practice English with other students	3,09	2,94	3,30	3,00
F4- I ask for help from English speakers	3,13	3,00	3,60	2,74
F5- I ask questions in English	3,85	3,81	4,45	3,26
F6- I try to learn about the culture of English speakers	3,56	3,63	3,85	3,21
FT	20,80	20,81	22,45	19,05

When the table relating to the item averages (Table. 1) was analyzed, some significant differences among the countries in terms of the score averages in some sub-tests were found; whereas the averages of the other sub-tests showed no significant differences. The differences among the country averages in sub-tests A (memory strategies) and F (social strategies) are relatively bigger and that the differences in sub-tests B (cognitive strategies), C (compensation strategies), D (meta-cognitive strategies) and E (affective strategies) are relatively smaller. In addition, the averages of the whole group in sub-tests B (cognitive strategies), C (compensation strategies), D (meta-cognitive strategies) and F (social strategies) are higher than those in sub-tests A (memory strategies) and E (affective strategies).

Interpreting the results, it is found that some individual strategies are used at a high rate such as B6, C6, D1, D2, D3, D4, D7, D8, D9, E2, F1, F6 (3.5+) while some of them (A5, A6, A7, E5) are used at a low rate (less than 2.5) and the rest fall between 2.5 and 3.4 the range which Oxford (1990) defines as medium use.

In terms of individual strategies, some certain differences take place among the groups: Saying or writing new English words several times is preferred a lot more by the Jordanian students whereas it is applied by the others less often. The finding supports what Oxford (1996, xi) states about the use of rote learning: "Cultures that encourage concrete sequential learning styles (such as those of Korea or some Arabic-speaking countries) often produce widespread use of rote memorization strategies. The Jordanian students are likely to apply their learning strategies used in their native language to English learning. Another interesting finding is that writing down feelings in a diary, writing notes, messages, letters or reports are used very frequently among the Jordanian students whereas they are not very common among the Spanish and the Turkish students. In order to find the rationale behind this, the Jordanian students and their teachers have been interviewed by the researcher. The Jordanian students explained that they need to write in English as much as possible to practice the language as they are not given enough writing exercises at school. Writing is considered to be one of the most difficult skills among the Jordanian learners of English as a second language. Writing in diaries, on the other hand, is not emphasized in language classrooms in Jordan. Also some cultural effects seem to underly their choice of writing as a means of self expression; it may be because writing is often used as a means of self expression in their native culture. The interviews with the Spanish and the Turkish students also revealed that diary writing is not encouraged in language classrooms in Spain and Turkey, and most students have little or no practice in diary writing in these two countries.

Reading in English for pleasure seems to be a more popular pastime for the Turkish and the Jordanian students than the Spanish students. The researcher consulted the English teachers of the Spanish students about the possible reasons of their choice and they explained that young people in Spain do not read much for pleasure even in Spanish.

Starting conversation in English is less common among the Spanish students. As an explanation for the reasons behind this, the teachers stated that Spanish students tend to be quite passive in the classroom and Spanish people in general feel quite embarrassed to speak in a foreign language. They also added there is a general lack of confidence to speak in public in the classroom especially in English. The data from the interviews with the Spanish students indicate some of them are mostly afraid of making mistakes while speaking English, some are lazy; and some others said that they do not want to be criticized by others. The Jordanian students have more effective communicative skills when compared to the other two groups; the data show they start a conversation and ask questions in English, and practise English with other students more often than the other two groups.

The Jordanian students are the ones to translate word-for-word and they are less likely to read English without looking up every new word than the Spanish and the Turkish students. Translating strategies of the Jordanian students may be better understood in Khuwaileh and Shoumali (2000) :
 "...learners of English at JUST or other Arab universities need to be taught and encouraged to think in

English when writing in English, rather than translating literally, ignoring the linguistic and cultural side in their translation" (p.182). In his study, Khuwaileh (1995) also found evidence that Arab students usually think and prepare their ideas in their native language and then translate them into English.

The Spanish students are less likely to make summaries of information than the Turkish and the Jordanian students. Summary writing may be culture specific. Any cultural influence on summary writing should be traced to make a more reliable inference about this strategy.

In order to find out any possible differences among the groups in terms of the use of the six general strategy groups, Kruskal Wallis test was conducted as the population of the applicants is not crowded enough and chi-square analysis was performed. The results of the tests are presented in Table.2.

Table 2. The Result of Kruskal Wallis Test Relating to the Item Order Averages of the Countries

Items	countries	N	Mean Rank	Chi-square	Df
Sub-test A (memory strategies)	Spain	16	12,94	21,22**	2
	Jordan	20	31,43		
	Turkey	19	37,08		
	Total	55			
Sub-test B (cognitive strategies)	Spain	16	23,78	3,53	2
	Jordan	20	33,23		
	Turkey	19	26,05		
	Total	55			
Sub-test C (compensation strategies)	Spain	16	23,31	5,17	2
	Jordan	20	25,45		
	Turkey	19	34,63		
	Total	55			
Sub-test D (metacognitive strategies)	Spain	16	25,72	0,6	2
	Jordan	20	29,88		
	Turkey	19	27,95		
	Total	55			
Sub-test E (affective strategies)	Spain	16	19,44	6,55*	2
	Jordan	20	30,90		
	Turkey	19	32,16		
	Total	55			
Sub-test F (social strategies)	Spain	16	27,78	6,38*	2
	Jordan	20	34,38		
	Turkey	19	21,47		
	Total	55			

* $p < 0,05$

** $p < 0,01$.

According to the Kruskal Wallis test results, significant difference in sub-test A ($p < 0.05$) was found in terms of the score order averages; and significant difference between the averages in sub-tests E and F ($p < 0.01$) was observed. No significant difference was found in the other sub-tests.

Having detected the significant differences among the countries, Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine which countries show differences in terms of score order averages. Mann Whitney U test results indicate that there is significant difference between Spain, Jordan and Turkey in the favor of Jordan and Turkey in the sub-tests A and E; and a significant difference between Turkey and Jordan in sub-test F for the favor of Jordan. According to these results, Turkey and Jordan have higher scores

than Spain in sub-tests A (memory strategies) and E (affective strategies); and Jordan has higher scores than Turkey in sub-test F (social strategies).

The data reveal that the Jordanian and the Turkish students spend more time storing and recalling new information than the Spanish students. This may be due to the fact that those learners are pre-disposed to using memorization as a learning technique. They are mostly encouraged by their teachers to memorize grammar rules and do translation exercises. As they are familiar with rote learning, the Jordanian and the Turkish students make use of some of the memory strategies mentioned in the questionnaire. As they are reputed to have a strong tradition of memorizing, they are good at exploiting the memory strategies listed in the SILL. The Spanish students, on the other hand, use the memory strategies at a low range less than 2.5 and they seem not to use any special strategies to learn new words.

An unpaired t- test was computed to investigate the possible effect of gender on language learning strategy choice and its results were illustrated in Table.3. According to the unpaired t- test results, a significant difference was observed between the sexes in terms of B and C sub-tests in the favor of the females. In terms of sub-tests A, D, E and F, no statistically significant difference was found between the sub-test scores regarding gender. According to the results presented in table 3., the female participants use cognitive and compensation strategies more frequently than the male participants of the study.

Table 3. Unpaired T-test Results of the Sexes Relating to the Difference in Sub-test Score Averages

Subscales	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p
AT	Female	43	26,44	6,72	0,322
	Male	12	25,75	6,05	
BT	Female	43	47,95	9,55	0,012*
	Male	12	47,92	10,68	
CT	Female	43	20,88	4,37	0,036*
	Male	12	20,83	4,06	
DT	Female	43	32,65	5,99	-0,654
	Male	12	34,00	7,45	
ET	Female	43	17,81	4,09	-0,187
	Male	12	18,08	5,46	
FT	Female	43	20,61	4,54	-0,618
	Male	12	21,50	4,03	

Conclusions and recommendations

The research has focused on the possible cross-cultural differences in language learning strategy use. The three groups of students of the same age, studying the same subject, but from three different cultural backgrounds have shown some differences in strategy use. The differences were not only in general strategy categories but also in the individual strategies they used.

In the light of the statistical findings, the differences in the six general strategy categories can be stated as follows: The Jordanian and the Turkish participants use memory strategies and affective strategies at a higher rate than the Spanish participants and the Jordanians show higher use of social strategies than the Turkish participants in order to learn English. The Jordanian students have proven more successful than the Turkish and the Spanish groups in strategy use whereas the Spanish students are the poorest in applying the memory and the affective strategies. The Turkish students, on the other hand, need to improve their social strategies in order to learn with others.

Regarding the individual strategies, the Jordanian students tend to employ some certain strategies such as rote learning, verbatim translation and looking up every new word instead of guessing the

meanings of words from the context. They also use the writing strategies a lot more than the other groups, especially to express their feelings. The Turkish students are the ones who make use of guessing strategies and mental pictures when they encounter some unknown words in a text. The Spanish students, on the other hand, are less likely to make summaries of information, to find conversation partners, to talk about their feelings and to reward themselves for success while they are learning English. These preferences seem to be shaped and influenced by their ways of learning in their native languages and their cultural backgrounds. The present study tried to investigate the differences in language learning strategy choice and the cultural reasons behind them and came up with some specific findings. There is a lack in the cross-cultural studies in this field; therefore, further study is needed to gain better insight in the effects of culture in language learning strategy choice.

It is very beneficial to help language learners be aware of strategy use in language learning. Such guidance will certainly make them conscious of the process and therefore may result in repair and improvement of the weak points in their strategy use. It is advisable for teachers to detect their students' strategy use and preference in order to compensate the weak points by applying strategy instruction using the most available materials for their students. Knowing about the cross-cultural differences in strategy use may impose language teachers to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students so that they can better employ the most suitable methods and materials in language classes.

The present study has provided insight into some cross-cultural differences in the use of language learning strategies employed by the Jordanian, the Spanish and the Turkish students while they are learning English and it may provide valuable data for future studies. The study compared the language learning strategy use of 55 participants from Spain, Turkey and Jordan. For future research, it is advisable to conduct the study in different countries on more crowded groups to find out the possible differences in language learning strategy use stemming from cultural differences. Further research should enrich the data collection process using instruments such as additional questionnaires, classroom observations, an analysis of the values, perceptions and beliefs of the cultures under investigation.

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