

The Students' Perceptions of Language Learning Strategies in an EFL Context: A Case Study

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Abstract. The aim of this study is to find out the EFL students' preferences of the language learning strategies and the difficulty they experienced with the application of these strategies while learning English in a preparatory program at a vocational university in Istanbul, Turkey. A total of seventy four preparatory students participated in the study. Data were obtained through a questionnaire about the language learning strategies. The findings of the study revealed significant implications in relation to emphasizing language learning strategies in preparatory programs.

1.Introduction

Due to the noticeable growth in the population of Foreign Language Learners (FLL) of English, there are new concepts emerged among the learners about the perceptions of learning a second/foreign language. Each learner is accepted as unique in terms of the purposes of studying a foreign language and each learner has his or her own methods and strategies while internalizing the learning process. These ways and methods make learning more successful in the light of aims and needs of the learner.

Oxford (1990, p.8) describes learning strategies as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed and more transferable to new situations. She adds that those strategies should permit learners to become self-directed and support learning both directly and indirectly. Also at the same time they should be conscious and involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive. According to Rubin (1987, p.23) language learning strategies contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly.

Some might focus on the cognitive strategies and some might focus on the meta cognitive or memory related strategies. Cognitive strategies makes the learners produce new language. Meta cognitive strategies enable learners to gain control over their own learning by managing the whole process. Memory related strategies allow learners to store and retrieve information by creating mental linkages. For instance L2 writing like L1 writing benefits from the learning strategies of

planning, self monitoring and substitution. Reading comprehension strategies benefit from guessing, inferencing and summarizing. In order for ESL learners to function in an academic setting, it is important that they should have a control over how to read in their L2.

To be able to come up with a beneficial educational result which may be producing the target language in an oral or written way, learners need to be clarified on these methods and they should be supported by experienced language instructors. That's why it might be quite helpful to start a class by discussing the expectations of the learners from the class, and why they are studying English.

Research shows that a good language learner questions about how he/she learns and he/she knows that by making effort, it will take some time to become a proficient learner in English. Moreover, he/she does not expect to learn the target language in a short time only sitting in the class. A conscious learner tries to use all of the opportunities to develop his/her language skills both inside and outside of the class. Chamot and Kupper (1989) state that a good learner is in favour of selecting strategies that work well together. Griffiths (2003) also reported in her article that lower level students prefer strategies that would help them with the memorisation of language; however, the higher level students prefer more sophisticated strategies related to interaction. The amount and the length of time of being exposed to English plays an important role to be able to succeed in ESL process by discovering personal strategies as well.

Studies, which are directly or non-directly related to ESL teaching, have been started to done with the aim of investigating the learners' perceptions and the learning and teaching process. On the other hand leaning style mostly determines the choice of L2 strategies. For instance, analytic-style learners would rather contrastive analysis, and rule learning when compared to global learners who prefer to guessing, scanning, and paraphrasing. Affecting factors such as negative attitudes and obligations toward the language itself are known as some of the reasons that affects learner performance. These might have a role in the learner perception about learning English as a second language and may change his/her perception when he/she thinks about personal reasons.

Based on what's been discussed above, the present study aims to identify the Turkish EFL students' preferences of the language learning strategies while learning English in a preparatory program and find out how often these students have difficulties with the application of the language learning strategies in tasks related to the four language skills. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the Turkish EFL students' preferences about the use of the language learning strategies while learning English in a preparatory program?
2. To what extent do the Turkish EFL students have difficulties with the application of the language learning strategies in tasks related to the four language skills?

2. Methodology

2.1 Setting

This study was conducted at a vocational university in Istanbul, Turkey located in the heart of Istanbul, along the Golden Horn shore in the Asian side. It is a mid-sized vocational university with an enrollment approximately 120 students to its preparatory school each year.

Students are taught intensive English courses on a module based system. A module consists of 9 weeks and the preparatory school department has 4 modules in an academic year. Participation and attendance has a significant role in grading. In each module, students are responsible to take three pen and paper exams or one oral exam for each skill. Skills are taught in separate language

classes. Six hours is dedicated for each skill namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking. Grammar course is provided within the modules when it is needed. At the end of the one academic year, to be able to pass the preparatory department, the students are obliged to pass with an IELTS test score which is 5.5 and in addition to IELTS score 4 module percentages are added to the final score. Final score consists of the 60% of the module grades and 40% of the IELTS test. If a student cannot get the average final score, s/he fails and s/he must reapply for the prep program.

2.1 Participants

A total of seventy-eight (N=78) preparatory students participated in the study. Specifically, fifty-two (N=52) female and 22 (twenty-two) male students took part during the data collection process of this study. Their ages range varied from 18- 27. All of them were at intermediate level of proficiency.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments

For the purposes of this study, a questionnaire was used to find out the Turkish EFL students' preferences of the language learning strategies while learning English in a preparatory program. The questionnaire comprised three parts. The first part (Part 1) aimed to gather demographic information (gender, age and proficiency level). In addition, Part 2 attempted to identify the participants' preferences in relation to using language strategies while learning English. Finally, Part 3 included 4 subparts which aimed to measure of the difficulty the students experienced with the application of reading, listening, writing, and speaking strategies in given tasks. All items were based on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 'always' to 'never'.

2.3 Data Analysis

3. Results

The analysis of the gathered data was done by using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 17.0. Specifically, descriptive statistics (number, percentage, mean, standard deviation) were used.

3.3.1. The students' preferences of the language learning strategies while learning English in a preparatory program

The findings presented in Table 1 below report the preferences of the students in relation to the use of language learning strategies while learning English in the preparatory program.

Table 1. The students' preferences of the language learning strategies while learning English in a preparatory program

	Never		Frequently		Always		M	SD
	f	%	f	%	f	%		
I set my own learning goals	4	5.4	25	33.8	45	60.8	2.550	0.600
I am motivated to learn	2	2.7	49	66.2	23	31.1	2.280	0.511
I check my progress towards achieving my goals	6	8.1	43	58.1	25	33.8	2.260	0.598
I use comments from my teacher to improve on my work	14	18.9	35	47.3	25	33.8	2.150	0.715

I use comments from my classmates to improve my work	20	27.0	39	52.7	15	20.3	1.930	0.689
I use comments from my family to improve my work	23	31.1	29	39.2	22	29.7	1.990	0.785
I revise versions of my work to improve on my work	25	33.8	41	55.4	8	10.8	1.770	0.631
I evaluate my own work	12	16.2	35	47.3	27	36.5	2.200	0.702
Every day i spend at least 1 hour to study vocabulary	43	58.1	24	32.4	7	9.5	1.510	0.667
Every day i spend at least 1 hour to study reading	43	58.1	24	32.4	7	9.5	1.570	0.575
Every day i spend at least 1 hour to study writing	36	48.6	32	43.2	6	8.1	1.590	0.639
Every day i spend at least 1 hour to study speaking	37	50.0	29	39.2	8	10.8	1.610	0.679
Every day i spend at least 1 hour to study listening	38	51.4	25	33.8	11	14.9	1.640	0.732

According to the gathered results, the participating students expressed their positive viewpoint in terms of the application of the following strategies during the language learning process: “I set my own learning goals” ($2,550 \pm 0,600$), “I am motivated to learn” ($2,280 \pm 0,511$), “I check my progress towards achieving my goals.” ($2,260 \pm 0,598$), “I use comments from my teacher to improve on my work” ($2,150 \pm 0,715$), “I use comments from my classmates to improve my work” ($1,930 \pm 0,689$), “I evaluate my own work.” ($1,930 \pm 0,689$), “I use comments from my family to improve my work.” ($1,990 \pm 0,785$), and “I evaluate my own work” ($2,200 \pm 0,702$).

On the other hand, they indicated that they found it difficult to adapt the strategies namely, “I revise versions of my work to improve on my work.” (1.770 ± 0.631), “Every day, I spend at least 1 hour to study vocabulary” (1.510 ± 0.667), “Every day, I spend at least 1 hour to study reading” (1.570 ± 0.575), “Every day, I spend at least 1 hour to study writing” (1.590 ± 0.639), “Every day, I spend at least 1 hour to study speaking” (1.610 ± 0.679), and “Every day, I spend at least 1 hour to study listening” (1.640 ± 0.732) during their studies.

3.3.2. The students’ preferences in relation to using language strategies in given tasks while learning English in the preparatory program

In an attempt to answer the second research question related to identifying the preparatory students’ preferences in terms of using language learning strategies, the results were reported under each language skill namely, reading, listening, writing and speaking.

Table 2. The students’ preferences about using language strategies in reading tasks

	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Frequently		Always		M	SD
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Recognize words automatically	0	0.0	7	9.5	42	56.8	15	20.3	10	13.5	3.380	0.839
Guess the meaning of an unknown word from context	3	4.1	5	6.8	38	51.4	25	33.8	3	4.1	3.270	0.816

Recognize the organization of ideas	4	5.4	11	14.9	30	40.5	19	25.7	10	13.5	3.270	1.051
Identify key information	1	1.4	16	21.6	27	36.5	20	27.0	10	13.5	3.300	1.003
Predict the content of a text	7	9.5	22	29.7	23	31.1	13	17.6	9	12.2	2.930	1.163
Understand information in a text when not openly stated	0	0.0	16	21.6	30	40.5	21	28.4	7	9.5	3.260	0.908
Read and respond critically	4	5.4	13	17.6	35	47.3	17	23.0	5	6.8	3.080	0.947
Distinguish fact from opinion	2	2.7	19	25.7	29	39.2	15	20.3	9	12.2	3.140	1.025
Ask questions about a text	4	5.4	14	18.9	26	35.1	16	21.6	14	18.9	3.300	1.144
Read carefully and understand the details of the text	3	4.1	10	13.5	27	36.5	30	40.5	4	5.4	3.300	0.918
Go through a text quickly to get the general idea	2	2.7	11	14.9	26	35.1	22	29.7	13	17.6	3.450	1.036
Read quickly and selectively to find important information	4	5.4	17	23.0	28	37.8	15	20.3	10	13.5	3.140	1.089
Search for simple information	18	2.3	14	18.9	11	14.9	19	25.7	12	16.2	2.910	1.445
Distinguish the main idea from the supporting detail(s)	2	2.7	17	23.0	28	37.8	18	24.3	9	12.2	3.200	1.020
Identify cause-effect relationships	3	4.1	13	17.6	27	36.5	21	28.4	10	13.5	3.300	1.043
Understand writers aim/attitude	7	9.5	10	13.5	22	29.7	22	29.7	13	17.6	3.320	1.195

According to the results reported in table above, the preparatory students sometimes experienced difficulty with the two reading strategies as “recognizing words automatically” (3.380 ± 0.839) and “guessing the meaning of an unknown word” (3.270 ± 0.816), “recognize the organization of ideas” (3.270 ± 1.051).

Moreover, the overall indicated that the participants also had difficulty with the application of the following reading strategies: “recognizing the organization of ideas” (3.270 ± 1.051), “identifying key information” (3.300 ± 1.003), “predicting the content of a text” (2.930 ± 1.163), “understanding information in a text when not openly stated” (3.260 ± 0.908), “reading and responding critically” (3.080 ± 0.947), “distinguishing fact from opinion” (3.140 ± 1.025), “asking questions about a text” (3.300 ± 1.144), reading carefully and understanding the details of the text” (3.300 ± 0.918), “reading quickly and selectively to find important information” (3.140 ± 1.089), “searching for simple information” (2.910 ± 1.445), “distinguishing the main idea from the supporting detail(s)” (3.200 ± 1.020), “identifying cause-effect relationships” (3.300 ± 1.043), and “understanding writers aim/attitude” (3.320 ± 1.195).

Finally, the participating students particularly had difficulty while going through a text quickly to get the general idea ($3,450 \pm 1,036$) which indicated that they need training particularly in how to find the gist in a given text.

Table 3. The students' preferences about using language strategies in listening tasks

	<i>Never</i>		<i>Rarely</i>		<i>Sometimes</i>		<i>Frequently</i>		<i>Always</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>		
Understand information when not openly stated in a lecture.	13	17.6	10	13.5	22	29.7	21	28.4	8	10.8	3.010	1.255
Predict the contents of a lecture.	8	10.8	22	29.7	17	23.0	17	23.0	10	13.5	2.990	1.233
Understand the subject matter of a lecture.	13	17.6	11	14.9	21	28.4	16	21.6	13	17.6	3.070	1.338
Listen for specific information.	4	5.4	17	23.0	18	24.3	20	27.0	15	20.3	3.340	1.197
Distinguish fact from opinion.	6	8.1	16	21.6	28	37.8	14	18.9	10	13.5	3.080	1.132
Listen to a lecture to take effective notes.	9	12.2	28	37.8	21	28.4	13	17.6	3	4.1	2.640	1.041
Follow question / answer sessions.	6	8.1	14	18.9	19	25.7	19	25.7	16	21.6	3.340	1.242
Understand spoken instructions.	3	4.1	17	23.0	26	35.1	16	21.6	12	16.2	3.230	1.105
Understand complex utterances.	1	1.4	16	21.6	28	37.8	22	29.7	7	9.5	3.240	0.948

According to the obtained results, the preparatory students also had difficulty with the following listening strategies: “understanding information when not openly stated in a lecture” (3.010 ± 1.255), “predicting the contents of a lecture” (2.990 ± 1.233), understanding the subject matter of a lecture” (3.070 ± 1.338), listening for specific information” (3.340 ± 1.197), “distinguishing fact from opinion” (3.080 ± 1.132), “listening to a lecture to take effective notes” (2.640 ± 1.041), “following question / answer sessions” (3.340 ± 1.242), “understanding spoken instructions” (3.230 ± 1.105) and “understanding complex utterances” (3.240 ± 0.948).

On the contrary, 17.6 % of the participants stated that they never came across with a difficulty to “understand the subject matter of a lecture”. One possible explanation behind this finding might be that students perceived this strategy as simply understanding the topic of the lecture which they commonly use in other skills as well.

Table 4. The students' preferences about using language strategies in writing tasks

	<i>Never</i>		<i>Rarely</i>		<i>Sometimes</i>		<i>Frequently</i>		<i>Always</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>		

Summarize information in your own words	4	5.4	12	16.2	20	27.0	21	28.4	17	23.0	3.470	1.173
Combine information from multiple texts to prepare an assignment	3	4.1	10	13.5	27	36.5	28	37.8	6	8.1	3.320	0.952
Extract most important information from a text for study purposes	0	0.0	11	14.9	30	40.5	22	29.7	11	14.9	3.450	0.924
Organize writing to express major and supporting ideas	1	1.4	12	16.2	30	40.5	18	24.3	13	17.6	3.410	1.006
Organize ideas for compare and contrast purposes	2	2.7	14	18.9	28	37.8	17	23.0	13	17.6	3.340	1.063
Organize ideas to show cause and effect relationships	4	5.4	12	16.2	30	40.5	16	21.6	12	16.2	3.270	1.089
Organize ideas for argumentative purposes	4	5.4	13	17.6	28	37.8	21	28.4	8	10.8	3.220	1.037
Organize ideas to describe events	1	1.4	23	31.1	27	36.5	14	18.9	9	12.2	3.090	1.023
Organize ideas for classification	4	5.4	9	12.2	34	45.9	23	31.1	4	5.4	3.190	0.917
Write references and quotations	5	6.8	13	17.6	30	40.5	16	21.6	10	13.5	3.180	1.090

Table 4 shows the range of the responses of the participants that they gave about using the language strategies in writing tasks. The frequency level of each statement was stabilized. Specifically, the participants stated that in writing they faced problems with the writing strategies namely, “summarizing information in your own words” ($3,470 \pm 1,173$), “extracting most important information from a text for study purposes” ($3,450 \pm 0,924$), and “organizing writing to express major and supporting ideas” ($3,410 \pm 1,006$).

Moreover, the writing strategies such as “combining information from multiple texts to prepare an assignment” ($3,320 \pm 0,952$), “organizing ideas for compare and contrast purposes” ($3,340 \pm 1,063$), “organizing ideas to show cause and effect relationships” ($3,270 \pm 1,089$), “organizing ideas for argumentative purposes” ($3,220 \pm 1,037$), “organizing ideas to describe events” ($3,090 \pm 1,023$), “organizing ideas for classification” ($3,190 \pm 0,917$) and “writing references and quotations” ($3,180 \pm 1,090$) were considered of medium level of difficulty.

Table 5. The students’ preferences about using language strategies in speaking tasks

	<i>Never</i>		<i>Rarely</i>		<i>Sometimes</i>		<i>Frequently</i>		<i>Always</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>		
Ask relevant questions in class	4	5.4	14	18.9	21	28.4	19	25.7	16	21.6	3.390	1.180
Participate in discussions/debates	7	9.5	19	25.7	27	36.5	12	16.2	9	12.2	2.960	1.140

Give oral presentations	8	1.8	12	16.2	18	24.3	18	24.3	18	24.3	3.350	1.308
React to speech and lecture	8	10.8	15	20.3	23	31.1	21	28.4	7	9.5	3.050	1.145
Produce correct pronunciation	4	5.4	17	23.0	29	39.2	18	24.3	6	8.1	3.070	1.011
Provide solutions to given problems	3	4.1	13	17.6	31	41.9	18	24.3	9	12.2	3.230	1.014
Summarize information in your own words	5	6.8	10	13.5	25	33.8	21	28.4	13	17.6	3.360	1.130
Describe a place/person/setting	6	8.1	12	16.2	30	40.5	15	20.3	11	14.9	3.180	1.127
Express ideas in your own words	7	9.5	9	12.2	30	40.5	13	17.6	15	20.3	3.270	1.197

According to Table 5, the participants experienced difficulty while using the strategies such as “asking relevant questions in class” ($3,390 \pm 1,180$), “participating in discussions/debates ($3,390 \pm 1,180$), “reacting to speech and lecture ($3,350 \pm 1,308$), “react to speech and lecture. ($3,050 \pm 1,145$), “producing correct pronunciation.” ($3,070 \pm 1,011$), “providing solutions to given problems ($3,230 \pm 1,014$), “summarizing information in your own words ($3,360 \pm 1,130$), “describing a place/person/setting” ($3,180 \pm 1,127$), “expressing ideas in your own words ($3,270 \pm 1,197$) and “giving oral presentations” ($3,350 \pm 1,308$).

4. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to find out the EFL students’ preferences of the language learning strategies and the difficulty they experienced with the application of these strategies while learning English in a preparatory program at a vocational university in Istanbul, Turkey.

According to the results obtained through the questionnaire, the preparatory students employed the language learning strategies such as setting their goals, being motivated to learn, achieving their goals and peer/teacher feedback. On the other hand, they stated that they could not use their time effectively to revise their courses and asked for some training.

Moreover, the participating teachers experienced difficulties with the application of the language strategies in tasks related to the four language skills. Specifically, for the reading and writing skills, the students had problems while getting the general idea while reading a text, summarizing the main topic, indicating the most important detail and finding the supporting ideas. On the other hand, the students stated that they never came across with a difficulty to understand the subject matter of a lecture while listening to a lecture. Finally, in relation to the speaking skill, the participating students clearly stated that they had difficulty while giving oral presentations.

In relation to the gathered results, the Language Preparatory Program should emphasize on students’ improvement of their language learning strategies and performance in related tasks. Training programs should be provided to the pre-service and in-service teachers to raise their awareness on how to integrate language learning strategies in the preparatory program. Full collaboration between the coordinators, instructors, and students is needed to attain success in the program. In this sense, the findings of this study should be emphasized while designing the language preparatory programs.

5. Limitations of the Study

Although the current study revealed some interesting and important findings, there were a number of limitations. Therefore, the findings should be taken as suggestive rather than definitive for further research. To begin with, the focus on this study was simply on the learning strategies of the students enrolled in a language preparatory program at a vocational school. Therefore, it lacks external validity and generalizability. Next, this study emphasize only on students' preferences of the language learning strategies. Due to the small number of instructors they were not included during the data collection process of the study. However, although this study has some limitations, it is significant for the field of identifying the students' preferences of the language learning strategies since it provides basis for the further research.

6. Suggestions for further research

In this study, there are several recommendations for further research. By enlarging the field of research domain, data might be collected from preparatory programs at state universities which would provide more reliable findings in relation to the effective language learning strategies to be emphasized in current programs. It is also important to identify the perceptions of the instructors and administrators which would provide more insight into the design of the language preparatory programs. Thus, there need to be more experimental and longitudinal studies that emphasize the importance of language learning strategies in different contexts.

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