A Study of Language Learning Strategies Used by Freshmen of Gedu College of Business Studies

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Aim: To study the use of language learning strategies among freshmen of Gedu College of Business Studies.
Study Design: A cross-sectional survey.
Methodology: Data were collected through SILL, and they were analyzed by means of descriptive statistics.
Results: Descriptive statistics revealed meta-cognitive as the most favored strategies while memory strategies were the least preferred ones among the respondents. However, the usage of all six strategies among Bhutanese college students was *medium*, which means the strategies were sometimes used. The independent t-test revealed statistically insignificant difference between the two groups of genders.
Conclusion: This study examined the use of LLS among the freshmen of Gedu College of Business Studies. The findings of this study will have implications for learner autonomy and naturalistic exposure to English language. Such experiences are, therefore, expected to assist acquisition of English as a second language and develop learners' communicative competence.

Keywords: Language learning styles; business students; gender; Bhutanese context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English has now become a global language, and therefore, it is studied as a foreign or second language [L2] in numerous contexts. In most English as second language [ESL] contexts, English is an important language in both schools and colleges, or even after them owing to its relevancy primarily in trade, education and diplomacy. In Bhutan English is one of the two languages that is used for instruction and learning, and students are formally trained in it from pre-primary through grade 12. It is also the main medium of instruction and learning in colleges that offer degrees in business, engineering, medicine, and social sciences, for instance.

Despite exposure to it and training in it from an early age, studies consistently show the difficulties Bhutanese students face in reaching the target language competency. For example, [1] and [2] found Bhutanese students' performance in English poor. While in a National Education Assessment, [3] notices the difficulties of grade 10 students faced in productive skills. Similarly, of 3,909 participants in PISA-D preliminary reading literacy survey, only 1.9% (n=74) could reach proficiency level 6, while majority of them, that is 41.3% (n=1613), fell below proficiency level 1 [4]. Also, according to [5], the Bhutanese students' average of 45.3% in PISA-D reading literacy is below the average of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. BCSEA [5] imputes this finding to participants' inability to perform tasks which demanded higher cognitive skills. This could have also resulted from two reasons, first, the Bhutanese classrooms are exam-oriented and textbook guided, where grammar is taught in isolation [6,7] with little talk time for students [see 8]. Such teacher-centered practices not only restrict naturalistic thinking, feeling and expression among students, but also deprive them from higher order thinking. The other is a perceived notion of poor extensive reading habit among Bhutanese students. However, this does not appear true as [9] and [10] observed their college and middle school students' attitude positive towards reading. Further, [11] reported English, not Dzongkha, as the preferred choice of language for reading among college students.

Studies acknowledge the contributions of several factors that result in either success or failure of second language acquisition and learning. These factors are gender [12,13,14], learners' backgrounds [15], learning styles [16], and emotional state and motivation [17,18,19,20]. Others include class size [21], teacher characteristics [22,23], and no or little autonomous learning in a naturalistic setting owing to multilingual social backgrounds [7,24].

One way to overcome these barriers is language learning strategies [LLS] because of their potential for developing language skills outside classrooms [see 13]. These strategies are conscious behavioral efforts that learners adopt while acquiring a second or foreign language. According to [25], Oxford's [13] taxonomy is the "the most comprehensive classification of language learning strategies to date" [p. 539]. Her taxonomy consists of six categories, and they are grouped under direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies while meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies are indirect strategies. These are "steps taken by students to enhance their own learning" [13, p. 1), and they are important "tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for communicative competence" [13, p. 1].

Scholars have examined the use of LLS among English language learners. However, their findings were inconsistent. Students' educational level and maturity appear to determine their choice of these strategies. For example, meta-cognitive strategies were the frequently used strategies in [26,27], and [28] while compensation was the most preferred strategies in [29]. The least used strategies among these university students were affective [26,29] and memory [27,28]. On the other hand, [30] observed affective strategies frequently used strategies among secondary school students while compensation strategies were the least used ones among them. Deployment of LLS between the two gender groups also remains inconsistent in these studies.

However, these studies were restricted to university students majoring in ESL and English literature and secondary ESL students. Therefore, it was necessary to explore the use of LLS among students majoring in business. This study therefore examined the use of LLS among freshmen of Gedu College of Business Studies. As in previous studies, it also investigated whether or not the males and the females deployed the LLS differently. These

examinations may offer some gainful insights to ESL teachers and, perhaps, encourage them to teach these strategies to their students. The findings will also have implications for learner autonomy and naturalistic exposure to English language. Such experiences are expected to assist acquisition of English as a second language and develop communicative competence.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What language learning strategies [LLS] do freshmen of Gedu College of Business Studies employ?
2. Is there any difference between language learning strategies [LLS] employed by the two groups, males and females?

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a cross sectional survey design that surveys a group of respondents once in a particular time [31,32,33,34]. According to [31], this design has the "advantage of measuring current practices" [p. 377] which are "their actual behaviors" [p. 377] of using language learning strategies in this context while studying English as a second language.

2.1 Respondents

The target population for this study was 500 freshmen pursuing bachelor degrees in commerce and business administration at Gedu College of Business Studies, the Royal University of Bhutan, in the autumn semester of 2020.

From the total population, as per [35], the researcher randomly selected a total of 217 respondents by means of table of random numbers in a spreadsheet. Considering non-response and null-response, the researcher randomly selected additional 50 prospective respondents. This sampling method eliminates

sample selection bias and gives each one of them an equal chance of getting selected for this study [33,36,37]. Then, each one of them was contacted and accordingly distributed the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning [SILL] questionnaire. From the total responses received, 112 [51.6%] of them were females, while 105 [48.4%] were males.

2.2 Data Collection Tool

Oxford [38] note, "one of the most prevalent ways to assess the use of language learning strategies is to use a summative rating scale, popularly known as questionnaire, an inventory, or (less accurately) a survey" [p. 1]. Based on this claim, this study administered [13]'s SILL version 7.0 on the sample respondents. The SILL was designed specifically for those English as foreign language [EFL] or ESL learners, and it assesses the use of language learning strategies among the respondents. It consists of 50 items that cater to six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies. This questionnaire enabled the respondents to identify their language learning strategies on a five-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 to 5, that was, 1= *Never or almost never true of me*, 2= *Usually not true of me*, 3= *Somewhat true of me*, 4= *Usually true of me*, and 5= *Always or almost always true of me*.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data obtained through SILL were analyzed by means of descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation based on [13]'s SILL ranges of results as shown in Table 1. Averaged scores between 3.5 and 5.0 were rated as "high", while those between 2.5 and 3.4 were considered as "medium". The scores between 1.0 and 2.4 were categorized as "low". An independent t-test was also performed to find whether or not there was any statistically significant difference in language learning strategies between the two gender groups.

Table 1. Interpretation of Scale Values of SILL

Degree of Use	Frequency of Use of SILL	Average mean score
High	Always or almost always used	4.5-5.0
	Usually used	3.5-4.4
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5-3.4
Low	Generally not used	1.5-2.4
	Never or almost never used	1.0-1.4

Source: Oxford (1990, p. 291)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analyses of ESL undergraduates' LLS and the frequencies of their use in their daily practices. It answers the question: *What language learning strategies do freshmen of Gedu College of Business Studies employ?*

3.1 Ranking of the Language Learning Strategies

Table 2 shows the ESL undergraduates' use of LLS, and it ranks the strategies based on their means. Specifically, among those six strategies, meta-cognitive strategies received the highest rating (M=3.27, SD=0.959) implying it was the most preferred strategies as in [26,27], and [28]. This finding suggests how the respondents harmonized these strategies by means of planning, focusing and evaluating their language learning process. Though the least preferred memory strategies (M= 2.79, SD= 0.982) corroborates with [27] and [28], this finding does not support the finding of [26] whose respondents ranked affective as the least preferred strategies. However, as can be seen in the table, the variations in standard deviations [SDs] suggest dispersions among the respondents despite their rankings based on the means.

As the overall rating of all six strategies fell between frequency ranges of 2.5 – 3.4 as per Table 1, the usage of LLS among ESL undergraduates in the Bhutanese context was *medium.* This means, as in [27], and [39], these language learning strategies were *sometimes used* as a means for acquiring or learning English language skills among the respondents. One cause may be teacher centeredness of Bhutanese classrooms [6,7] which seemingly have impeded students' higher order thinking abilities as in [8]. As indicated in [24], the other may be multilingual nature of Bhutanese social settings, which encourage little or no use of English outside classrooms or even during in-class group activities.

Like those business major participants in [40], the *medium* usage of the strategies among these business students seems to indicate their primary motive of fulfilling academic requirements. Therefore, considering the *medium* use of LLS in Table 2, it is prudent to first teach students these LLS in English language classrooms so that they can practise them independently. This may allow the students to use English freely and develop its competency naturally outside formal settings unlike in [17] although formal learning will definitely complement natural learning. These findings, however, reject the findings of [28,29], and [30] who noticed *high* usage of these strategies among their respondents.

3.2 Respondents' usage of Meta-cognitive Strategies

Table 3 presents the ratings against items of meta-cognitive strategies for learning English, and this variable comprises nine items.

Of the nine items, the means of the first three items fell between 3.5 and 5.0 as per the interpretation of scale values of SILL given in Table 1. It, therefore, suggests that the respondents *usually* paid attention to someone speaking in English, noticed their mistakes and corrected them, and explored ways to improve their English. On the other hand, the ratings of the remaining six items fell between 2.5 and 3.4, indicating *medium* usage of them among the respondents. However, the variability among the respondents is high on *I look for people I can talk to in English* (SD=1.086) and *I have clear goals for improving my English language skills* (SD=1.027). These variations imply their engagements in other tasks such as attentive listening, self-monitoring, and practice, for instance, instead of setting goals for improving language skills and looking for people to talk in English.

Table 2. Six language learning strategies

Language learning strategies	n	Mean	SD	Degree of Use
Meta-cognitive Strategies	217	3.27	0.959	Medium
Compensation Strategies	217	3.13	0.989	Medium
Social Strategies	217	3.08	1.062	Medium
Cognitive Strategies	217	3.03	0.940	Medium
Affective Strategies	217	2.92	1.049	Medium
Memory Strategies	217	2.79	0.982	Medium
Overall	217	3.04	0.997	Medium

Table 3. Meta-cognitive strategies

Items	n	Mean	SD	Degree of Use
I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	217	3.73	0.910	High
I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	217	3.52	0.908	High
I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	217	3.50	0.938	High
I think about my progress in learning English.	217	3.40	0.918	Medium
I have clear goals for improving my English language skills.	217	3.26	1.027	Medium
I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	217	3.19	0.951	Medium
I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	217	3.13	0.939	Medium
I look for people I can talk to in English.	217	2.90	1.086	Medium
I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	217	2.77	0.952	Medium
Total	217	3.27	0.959	Medium

Table 4. Compensation strategies

Items	n	Mean	SD	Degree of Use
When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	217	3.38	1.003	Medium
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	217	3.34	0.978	Medium
If I cannot think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	217	3.30	0.947	Medium
I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	217	2.94	0.998	Medium
I read English without looking up every new word.	217	2.94	0.950	Medium
I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	217	2.87	1.061	Medium
Total	217	3.13	0.989	Medium

3.3 Respondents' usage of Compensation Strategies

This section discusses the respondents' ratings for compensation strategies. Although the item – *When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures* (M=3.38) – received the highest rating, the second highest deviation (SD=1.003) among the respondents was also observed on it.

In short, as the means of all six items fell between 2.5 and 3.4, the degree of usage of compensation strategies is *medium* among the respondents. This indicates that the respondents sometimes paraphrased, gestured, guessed, coined, and searched for information in learning English. Use of such compensation strategies, whenever confronted with challenges of either comprehension or production, according to [13],

contributes to language acquisition and skills development.

3.4 Respondents' usage of Social Strategies

Table 5 outlines the frequency of respondents' responses regarding the usage of social strategies. Of the total items, *If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again* gained the highest mean score of 3.33. The item which received the least score was *I try to learn about the culture of English speakers* (M=2.78). However, despite achieving the second highest mean score (M=3.12), the respondents' responses seem to be more concentrated on *I ask questions in English* as its SD of 0.891 is the lowest when compared with the SDs of other items.

Table 5. Social strategies

Items	n	Mean	SD	Degree of Use
If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	217	3.33	1.067	Medium
I ask questions in English.	217	3.12	0.891	Medium
I ask for help from English speakers.	217	3.12	1.116	Medium
I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	217	3.10	1.149	Medium
I practise English with other students.	217	3.00	1.069	Medium
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	217	2.78	1.082	Medium
Total	217	3.08	1.062	Medium

Table 6. Cognitive strategies

Items	n	Mean	SD	Degree of Use
I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	217	3.55	1.004	High
I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	217	3.53	1.019	High
I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	217	3.29	0.959	Medium
I practice the sounds of English.	217	3.16	0.992	Medium
I use the English words I know in different ways.	217	3.11	0.832	Medium
I read for pleasure in English.	217	3.10	1.018	Medium
I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	217	3.10	0.895	Medium
I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	217	3.05	0.899	Medium
I try to talk like native English speakers.	217	2.89	1.073	Medium
I say or write new English words several times.	217	2.89	0.875	Medium
I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	217	2.82	0.941	Medium
I try not to translate word for word.	217	2.68	0.869	Medium
I start conversations in English.	217	2.67	0.912	Medium
I try to find patterns in English.	217	2.64	0.872	Medium
Total	217	3.03	0.940	Medium

Because the overall mean score of 3.08 fell between 2.5 and 3.4 as per Table 1, the social strategies were *sometimes used* by the ESL respondents owing to their *medium* use while learning English as a second language.

3.5 Respondents' usage of Cognitive Strategies

Table 6 presents the ratings of items that describe the usage of cognitive strategies. The use of two items is *high* as their means fell between 3.5 and 5.0 as per Table 1 while the degree of usage of the remaining items was *medium*. This means the respondents *usually used* skills such as writing notes, letters, or reports, and watching English language TV shows or movies when learning English as a second language. The remaining skills were *sometimes used* because of their *medium*.

Still, as per Table 1, the usage of these items of cognitive strategies is also *medium* suggesting

that they were *sometimes used* by the Bhutanese ESL undergraduates.

3.6 Respondents' usage of Affective Strategies

Table 7 illustrates the means of all six items of affective strategies, and they ranged between 2.50 to 3.37.

As they fell between 2.5 and 3.4 as per Table 1, the use of affective skills such as reducing anxiety and encouraging oneself, for instance, was *medium*. This means these skills were

sometimes used among the respondents while learning English language.

3.7 Respondents' usage of Memory Strategies

Table 8 shows the rankings of items of the memory strategies. As means of seven items fell between 2.5 and 3.4 as per Table 1, their usage among the respondents fell in the *medium* category. Use of flashcards and rhymes as a means to remembering new English words, on the other hand, fell in *low* category. This means they were *generally not used* during the English language learning process.

Table 7. Affective strategies

Items	n	Mean	SD	Degree of Use
I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	217	3.37	0.969	Medium
I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	217	3.24	1.056	Medium
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	217	3.12	0.958	Medium
I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	217	2.67	1.101	Medium
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	217	2.64	1.093	Medium
I write down my feelings in a language learning dairy.	217	2.50	1.114	Medium
Total	217	2.92	1.049	Medium

Table 8. Memory strategies

Items	n	Mean	SD	Degree of Use
I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	217	3.25	0.864	Medium
I use new English words in a sentence so that I can remember them.	217	3.18	0.938	Medium
I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	217	3.07	0.983	Medium
I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	217	2.86	1.081	Medium
I review English lessons often.	217	2.82	0.906	Medium
I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on the street sign.	217	2.70	1.054	Medium
I physically act out new English words.	217	2.55	0.985	Medium
I use flashcards to remember new English words.	217	2.37	0.987	Low
I use rhymes to remember new English words.	217	2.35	1.035	Low
Total	217	2.79	0.982	Medium

Table 9(a). Group statistics

Gender		n	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Total LLS _Scores	Male	105	3.03	0.561	0.055
	Female	112	3.04	0.527	0.050

Table 9(b). Independent samples test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total LLS _Scores	Equal variances assumed	0.191	0.663	-0.215	215	0.830	-0.016	0.074	-0.161	0.130
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.215	211.556	0.830	-0.016	0.074	-0.162	0.130

Despite their ranking based on means, there were deviations among the respondents regarding the use of skills such as visual, auditory, and tactile while learning English as a second language.

3.8 Gender and Language Learning Strategies

Tables 9(a) and (b) present the independent t-test, and it answers the question: *Is there any difference between language learning strategies employed by the two groups, males and females?*

Similar to the findings of [27], and [39], the overall t-test report of LLS also revealed no significant difference in scores for males (M=3.03, SD=0.561) and females (M=3.04, SD=0.527; *t*(215)= -0.215, *p*=0.830). According to Cohen [1988, as cited in 41], the magnitude of the difference in the means was very small (eta squared = 0.0002).

This finding, therefore, rejects the findings of those studies that found differences in terms of type and frequency of strategy use between males and females [e.g.,42,30]. Educational context seems to be the cause of this incongruence, not age as claimed by [43], because the respondents of these studies were both from universities and a secondary school.

4. CONCLUSION

A cross-sectional survey was conducted on college students (n=217) to examine the use of LLS among business students and study difference between the two gender groups. Descriptive analyses of the data collected by means of Oxford's (1990) SILL version 7.0 revealed *medium* use of LLS among the respondents, which means those strategies were *sometimes used* by the Bhutanese undergraduates. Although the degree of use of all six LLS was *medium*, still, the most frequently employed strategies among them were the meta-cognitive strategies and the degree of use of three of these strategies was high. The least preferred ones, on the other hand, were the memory strategies and the degree of two of these strategies was low. No statistically significant difference was also observed between the two groups of respondents.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

As the findings show *medium* usage of LLS among Bhutanese students, the ESL teachers are advised to, first teach those strategies in formal settings, and then allow their students to practise them in natural settings. Such awareness, training and deployment of LSS in both formal and informal settings may quicken target language acquisition and learning. As a result, they may be able to perform better in other subjects which are studied in English.

Although no statistically significant difference was observed between the two groups of genders, it is highly advisable to give early exposure to English language to both genders, so as to maximize the deployment of these strategies during their formative age.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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