Language Learning Strategy Preferences of Turkish Students

Duygu Özmen
Zirve University Prep School
Gaziantep, Turkey.

Introduction

Learning strategies are defined as ''behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner's encoding process'' (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). More specifically, Oxford (1990) defines as ''specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.'' ''Learning strategies for L2s help build learner autonomy, which requires the learner to take conscious control of his or her own learning processes'' (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Hsiao and Oxford (2002) stated that using strategies in L2 is linked to proficiency or achievement. Strategies used by learners at the early stages of their L2 development may differ from those used when they are more proficient. Strategies are selected intentionally and systematically by more effective L2 learners (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990) while less successful L2 learners choose various strategies in a desperate, random way and do not pay sufficient attention to the relevance of a strategy to the task (Abraham & Vann, 1987). Lessard-Clouston (1997) explains the characteristics of language learning strategies as being learner generated, steps taken by language learners. They improve language learning and help develop language competence, as reflected in the learner's skill in listening, speaking, reading, or writing FL. Within communicative approaches to language teaching, developing communicative competence in the target language is a key for the learners (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Bialystok (1990) states that speakers use communication strategies intentionally and consciously in order to deal with difficulties in communicating in a foreign language. As Oxford (1990) defines, language learning strategies ''are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence''.

Oxford (2003) stated a given strategy is essentially neutral until the context of its use is thoroughly considered. A strategy is useful if the following conditions are provided: a) the strategy is related well to the L2 task at hand, b) the strategy matches the particular student's learning style preference, and c) the student grabs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies. Cohen (1998) also claimed that ''with some exceptions, strategies themselves are not inherently good or bad, but have the potential to be used effectively'' by learners. Students are not always aware of the power of using strategies, yet skilled teachers help their students develop an awareness of learning strategies and enable them to use appropriate strategies (Oxford, 2003).

The Question of the Study

In this study, the goal was to understand which language learning strategies are mostly applied by Turkish learners.

Methodolghy

The quantitative research tool on learning strategies I used was Oxford's (1990) self-assessment inventory: the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). It is designed for use in both ESL and EFL contexts. The instrument was translated into Turkish.Oxford (1990) describes language learning strategies in two major classes: direct and indirect. Direct strategies are divided into three sub-groups, which are memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. The three sub-groups of indirect strategies are metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Collected data was discussed under these six groups.

31 participants were students in Zirve University English Prep School. They finished two-month pre-intermediate leveland succeeded in final exams to pass to the intermediate level. That is why they were mentioned as 'successful learners' and chosen to examine their strategies. 16 of them were female and 15 were male. Average age was 20. The study was conducted in the classroom, and participants were told that responses would stay anonymous.

Findings

In terms of comparing six groups, results show that compensation, metacognitive and social strategies are the most commonly used ones. The percentage of using compensation strategies is 50%, for metacognitive strategies it is 57% and it is 53% for social strategies. Affective strategies are the least used ones with the percentage of 26.
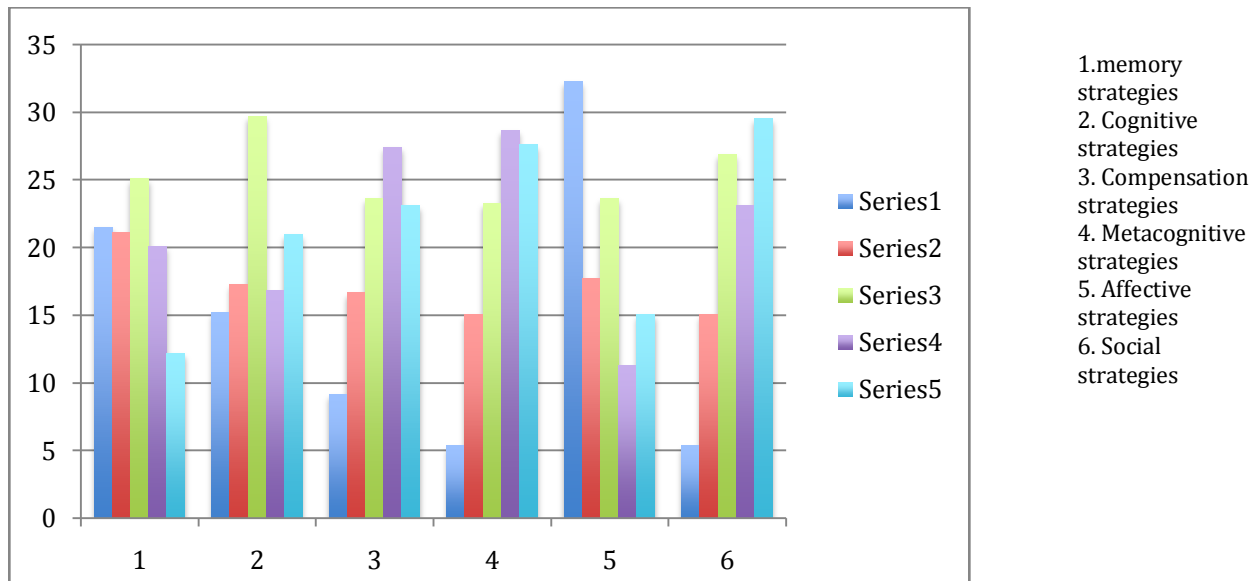

1.memory strategies
2. Cognitive strategies
3. Compensation strategies
4. Metacognitive strategies
5. Affective strategies
6. Social strategies

Table 6: percentages of responses for six groups of strategies

The first 9 elements of the inventory examine the memory strategies. It is seen that 42% of students do not use memory strategies very effectively. These students do not often create mental linkages such as grouping, associating, and placing new words into a context. They do not apply images and sounds to remember new vocabulary. It means they do not make a mental picture of the situation or use rhymes to remember a word. They do not prefer using imagery, keywords, and semantic maps. These students also do not review English lessons well. They are also weak in employing action, in other words using physical response or sensation. It means that they do not practice new English words by physically acting out.
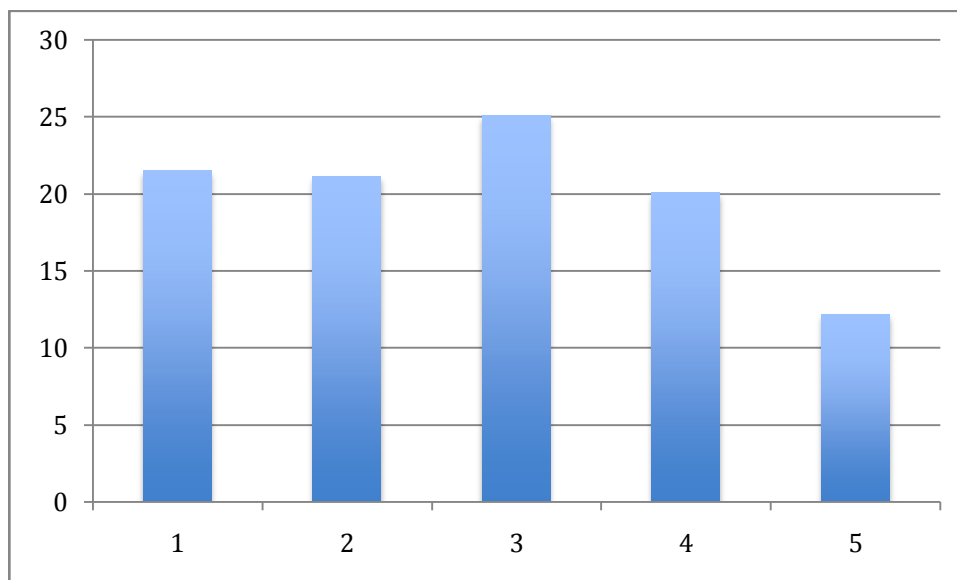

Table 1: Percentages of Memory Strategies Usage

For cognitive strategies, results show that only 36% of the students use them frequently. It means that they repeat new words by saying or writing and practice naturalistically.

They start conversations in English to practice English sounds and new words. These students also prefer watching television programs and English movies.They receive and send messages by reading for pleasure and writing notes, messages or reports. By using cognitive strategies, the students reason deductively and analyze expressions. They skim reading texts to get the main idea first, and then go back and read carefully. By searching for words in L1, they analyze contrastively and translate. They look for words in Turkish that are similar to new English words. They try to find patterns and find the meaning of the words by dividing them into parts that they understand.
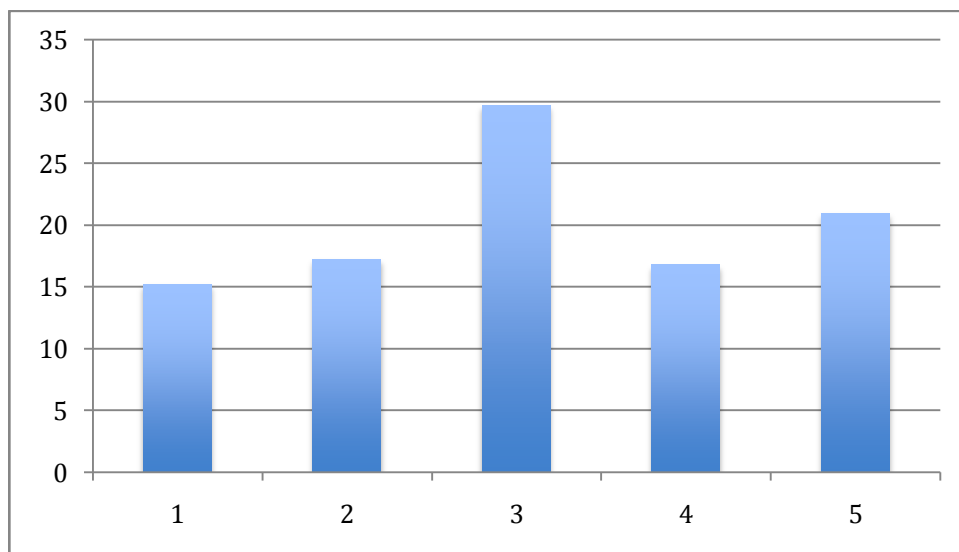
Table 2: Percentages of Cognitive Strategies Usage

The results reveal that %50 of the students use compensation strategies frequently. They are good at using linguistic clues. They can also overcome limitations in speaking and writing. They use mime or gestures in an English dialogue if they cannot remember a word. They can also make up new words when they do not know the right ones in English. Instead of looking up every new word in a reading passage, they try to find the meaning in context. In a dialogue, they try to guess what the other person will say next in English. When they can not think of an English word, they use a word or phrase with the same meaning.
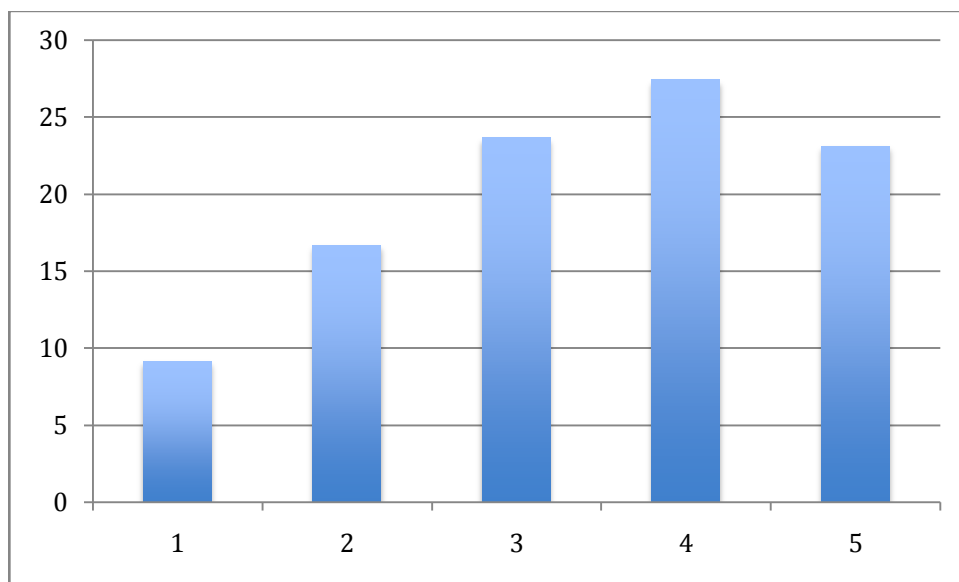
Table 3: Percentages of Compensation Strategies Usage

The answers of the participants show that only 20% of the students do not use metacognitive strategies. 57% of them pay attention to their mistakes and try to find ways to be a better learner.

They know to learn from their mistakes. They seek for opportunities to read and speak in English. They listen carefully when someone is speaking English. They also set goals to improve their skills and think about their development in learning process.They plan a schedule to have enough time to study English. They consider their progress in learning English.
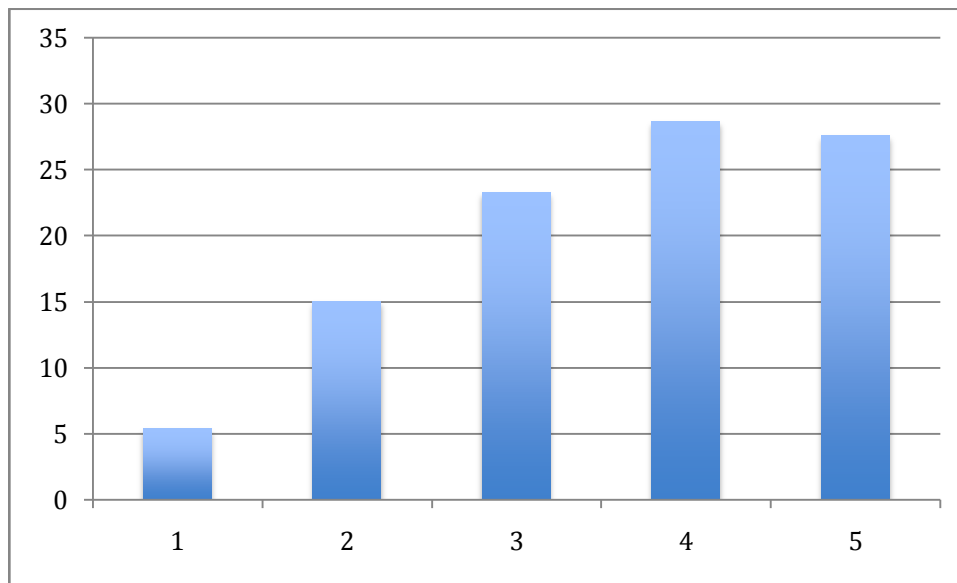

Table 4: Percentages of Metacognitive Strategies Usage

The results for the affective strategies reveal that most of the students are not good at using these strategies. Only 20% of the students are able to lower their anxiety and encourage themselves. The %50 percent does not know how to relax when they are afraid of using the language. When they are afraid of making a mistake, they cannot encourage themselves to speak English. They do not prefer giving reward to themselves when they do well. They rarely consider their feelings about learning English. Writing down the feelings in a language learning diary or talking to someone about how they feel while learning English is not a common strategy among these students.
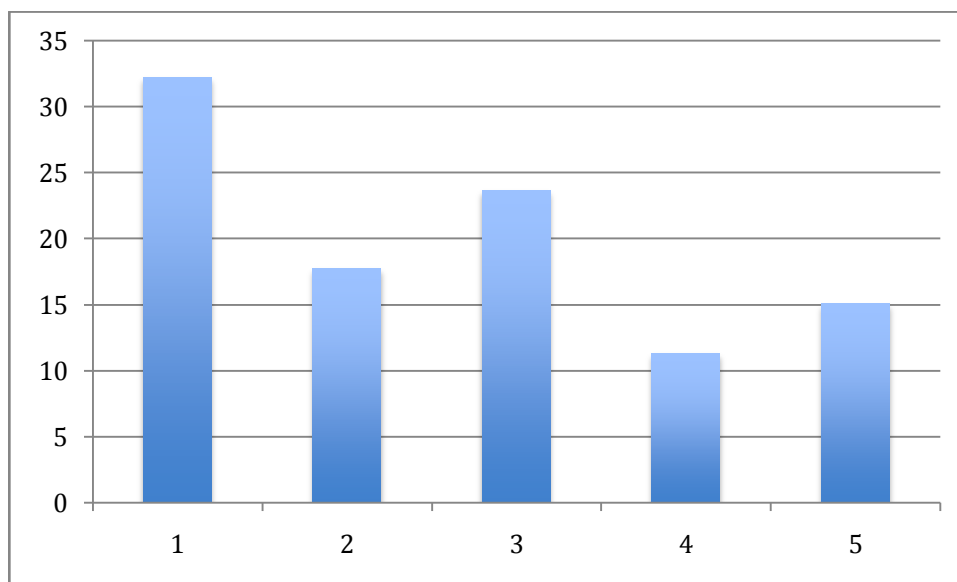

Table 5: Percentages of Affective Strategies Usage

As shown in table 6, 53% of the participants use social strategies in learning English. They are eager to ask questions for clarification or correction. If they do not understand something, they do not hesitate to ask the other person to slow down or say it again. They are eager to be corrected by English speakers when they talk. They often cooperate with other students to practice and ask help from native speakers.

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They like to practice English with their peers. They empathize with native speakers by developing cultural understanding. They ask questions in English and try to learn about their culture.
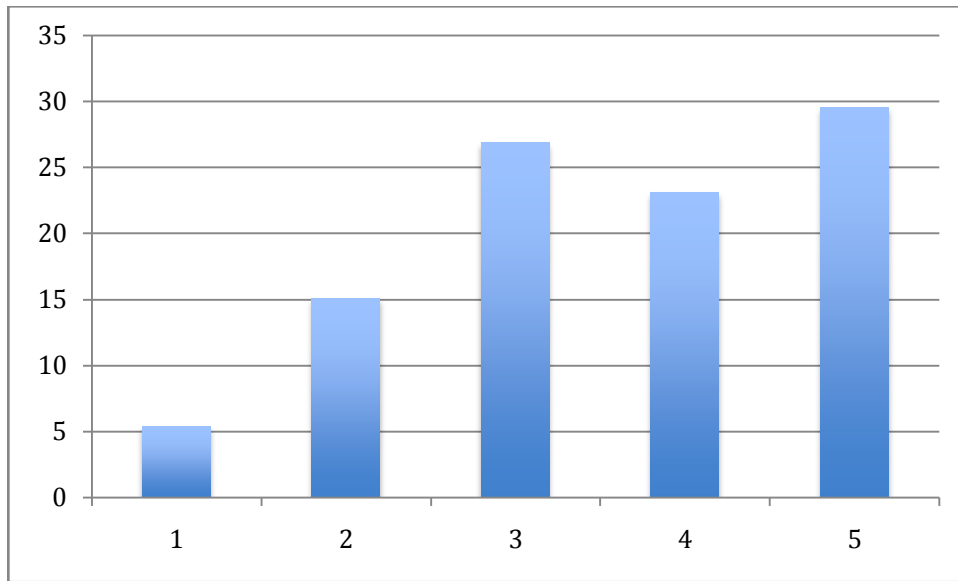

Table 6: Percentages of Social Strategies Usage

The same study was conducted with 22 elementary students at the same school. These participants were the students who could not pass elementary level after a two-month term and repeated the same level. The results show that 31% of these repeaters use memory strategies, 38% use cognitive strategies, 48% use compensation strategies, 48% use metacognitive strategies, 30% use affective strategies and 36% use social strategies. To compare the results of both groups, the difference between usages of social strategies seems significant. It shows that repeaters are more likely to be discouraged by their mistakes, and they are not eager to ask help from native speakers or cooperate with other students. It also means that they do not focus on developing cultural understanding.

1. memory strategies
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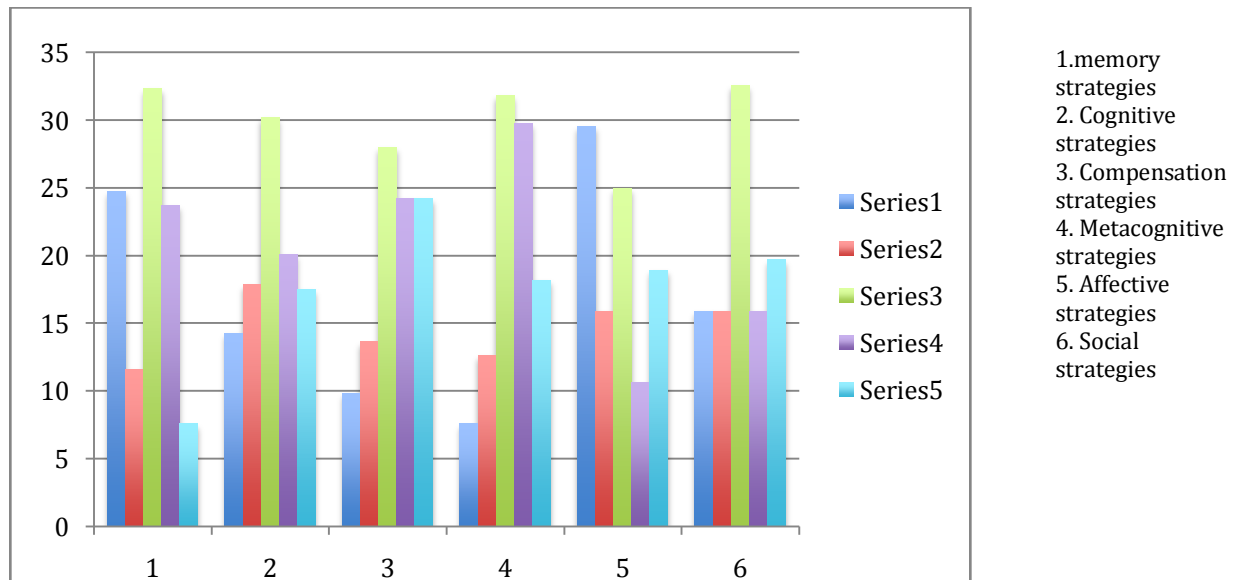
Conclusion

In this study, the results show that the success of these students is not directly related to the strategies they use since the numbers of students who use strategies are not so high. In terms of comparing both groups, it is seen that there are not significant differences between successful students and repeaters.

A good number of repeaters also use strategies as frequents as the successful students. However, it may indicate that students in both groups do not use these strategies efficiently enough or they do not realize in which way these strategies help them in learning process. Teachers may help students become aware of the benefits of these strategies and discover which learning styles they have. By discovering their strengths and weaknesses, students may achieve to become autonomous learners.

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