Viewing gender and sill (strategy inventory for language learning) in efl context at university level

Juliana ÇYFEKU[1],

Abstract

This study builds on previous research using the world wide known research instrument the SILL questionnaire. The subject of the present study were the 105 freshman university students (Females = 68; Males = 37) at "F.S.Noli" University, Economic Faculty in Korça, Albania. A Placement test was conducted since the beginning of the study and the students were grouped under two levels of proficiency: Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate controlled groups. The present large scale study investigated the strategies that male and female university students employed in EFL learning. It addressed the hypothesis 1) whether female students employed more strategies in English language learning than male students and 2) if overall learners in terms of proficiency, regardless gender, resulted in this study that: the more proficient the language learners tended to be, the higher the number of the strategies they employed in EFL learning. Thus it related the strategy use to gender and L2 proficiency and included analysis of variations in the use of overall engendered strategies on the SILL. Based on the data collection, the comparisons of respective controlled group findings revealed greater use of language learning strategies by females outperforming considerably males and by more successful learners, higher levels of strategy use by both genders. The aim of the study was to foster in upraising the students' awareness so that they themselves explore different language learning strategies, choose their specific set of affective strategies, evaluate, experiment and delve into authentic oral and written input to finally promote achievement in L2 mastery and eventually yield success in EFL academic learning.
Key words: gender, strategy, proficiency, SILL (research instrument), variations

Introduction

Learning English as a foreign/ second language is a process that demands challenging efforts. Although people are capable of learning a foreign language, many experience failure at different stages in the process of learning it. Learning English as a FL does not mean only the memorization of some vocabulary and sentence structures. The EFL learner should refer to Freeman and Freeman (2004) for a simply and clearly written explanation of the components of the language in question. In short, the linguistic

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1. *Juliana Çyfeku, PHD candidate, 'F.S.Noli' Korça University, Albania, juliana.cyfeku@gmail.com*

components the university learners need to delve into are: phonology (sound system), syntax (sentence structure), lexicon (vocabulary), semantics (meanings) and pragmatics (usage). Since in this research, English language is part of an ESP academic program, it fosters the learners a strong motivation for a good start in L2 mastery and in the meantime it demands available ways at the end of this complex process to obtain sufficient language facility to respond to various incoming professional situations.

Besides, adult learners seem to evaluate themselves whether they are 'good' at learning foreign language or not. They embody cognitive tools which assist them personally in identifying effective and meaningful learning routes to second language acquisition. Since the university students come from high schools and have a certain knowledge in English as a FL, they may not be equipped with the skills needed to study abstract concepts in it. Based on their prior knowledge these kinds of learners need to go further with their academic study to deepen their language proficiency in English. Cummins (1988) in his classic work has separated language skills in two major categories of proficiency. **1)** Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills **(BICS)** that typically require a few years to develop. This is truly the stage of the participants' level of EFL proficiency in the present study. They are able to converse about every day affairs and are able to respond to concrete stimuli. However, they need to extend their study to what Cummins calls **2)** Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency **(CALP)**, the ability which allows the EFL learner to discuss and study conceptual and academic material in the second / foreign language.

Specific research studies concerning gender and other factors in EFL learning.

The relatively few studies that have examined second / foreign language learning with respect to gender point to female students' advantages, in terms of achievement, attitudes and motivation towards foreign language learning (see Sunderland, 2000 a, for an overview). Subtle differences between males and females were observed.

Moreover, the relationship of the use of language learning strategies to success in mastering a second or foreign language, has been the focus of most quantitative studies analyzing gender and other variables. One of the most insightful strategy-related models of foreign language learning is that of MacIntyre (1994) who sheds lights on the importance of *affective factors* and links the use of a given language learning strategy with task demands, proficiency, aptitude, situation, attitude, motivation, previous success, anxiety, self-confidence, goals, and criteria for success. In this model, students (influenced by all the above variables) must be aware of the strategy they are willing to choose to foster success in L_2 mastery. In addition to identifying the types of strategy used by language learners, researchers are also exploring various factors that deeply affect the use of strategy by EFL learners. In her review of a number of learner strategy studies Oxford (1989) lists these *factors*: language being learned; duration; degree of awareness; age; gender; and *affective variables* such as: attitudes, motivation, language learning goals, personality characteristics and gender personality type; learning style; aptitude; career orientation; language teaching methods; task requirements all considered as determinants in foreign language acquisition However, there have been studies where variation by proficiency level has occasionally emphasized the neglect of other variables such as gender or learner styles. On the opposite, one of the most frequent cited studies of gender and strategy use using SILL[2] was conducted by Oxford and Green (1995) to students in Puerto Rico where

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2. *SILL – Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford 1989)*

(N = 178 female) and (N = 196 male) participated, reported significant results as affected by gender. The researchers found that males and females differed on nearly one-third of the strategies on the SILL (15 out of 50). On all strategies (six in total) except for the three, such differences were constant across proficiency levels, with females using higher levels of them.

Later on a South African students' utilization of strategies was examined by Dreyer and Oxford in a 1996 SILL- based survey study. The participants consisted of 305 freshman (females = 179; males = 126) studying English at Potchefstrom University in South Africa all of whom were native speakers of Afrikaans. Overall, females used a significantly higher number of strategies than did males.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 105 freshman students at "F.S.Noli" Korça University, Economic Faculty in Albania participated in the study. There were respectively N = 68 Females and N = 37 Males. Their average age varied from 19 - 20. They were observed from the teacher over a full time semester which started on October, 12th 2010 and ended on February, 28th 2011. A Placement test was conducted at the beginning of the study to define their level of comprehension in English. The students were grouped under two levels of proficiency: Pre-intermediate and Intermediate[3]. For a precise view of the students division see Table.1.

Table 1
Distribution of students by Course level and Gender

Course level	Female	Male	Total	Percentage
Intermediate	35	9	44	42 %
Pre-Intermediate				
	33	28	61	58 %
Overall	68	37	105	100 %

The purpose of the present study was to describe the variations in overall English language learning at the individual item level, by the students into different levels, and by males and females, in the specific setting of "F.S.Noli " Korça University , Economic Faculty in Albania. The central focus was the gender gap that existed among male and female university students in EFL. Since each learner embodies specific skills in language learning, various results yield in the field of foreign language acquisition. Many researchers have dealt with this problem in various educational contexts at different course levels .They have attempted to give possible solutions in reducing at the lowest possible level the gender variations in L_2 mastery. Nevertheless, differences will always be a continuous part of our teaching experience in foreign language learning and achievement. Thus, all kinds of English learners, at any proficiency level need to develop their own metacognition about themselves as strategic learners to surpass their current level of achievement into a more advanced language level diminishing to the maximum the differences that may exist or occur alongside the process of English language learning. To sum up what we

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3. *According to the Common European Framework for Adult courses of EFL they pertained to B1 level.*

overstated, this study developed within the borders of the following research hypothesis to reach to valid, reliable and practical outcomes that make both ends meet in the EFL mastery from both parts: teachers and student learners. They are as following:

Hypothesis I - Female university students employ more strategies than male university students in EFL learning.

Hypothesis II - More proficient university language learners use a greater variety and often a great number of language learning strategies in EFL learning.

Instrument

SILL-Questionnaire *(Strategy Inventory for Language Learning)*

A great number of studies, concerning the relationship of strategies to a student's degree of success in language learning and to other variables, have used as an instrument the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, or SILL (reprinted in Oxford, 1990).This is a self - scoring questionnaire that has been the key instrument in more than 40 studies, including 12 dissertations and theses. These studies have involved approximately 8000 students around the world. The SILL of Oxford (1989) was the first of this kind designed in assessing the strategy frequency used by the students at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey. It has two versions: **(1**) The 80 items, which is mainly produced for English speakers who are learning a foreign language; **(2**) The 50 items, which is designed for EFL / ESL learners by Oxford (1990). The second is utilized in this study. Students are required to answer the SILL items on the Likert' s 5 point scale ranging from *'Never'* or *'Almost never true'* to *'Almost true'* or *'True'.* The structure of the SILL is based on Oxford's (1990) system for classifying strategies into six groups:

(A) Memory – related strategies, such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, moving physically, and reviewing in a structured way (items 1 - 9)

(B) General cognitive strategies, such as reasoning, analyzing, summarizing and practicing (items 10 - 23)

(C) Compensation strategies (to make up for limited knowledge), such as guessing meanings from context and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning (items 24 - 29)

(D) Metacognitive strategies for evaluating one's progress, planning for language tasks, consciously searching for practice opportunities, paying attention and monitoring errors (items 30 - 38)

(E) Affective strategies for anxiety reduction, self-encouragement and self-reward (items 39 - 44)

(F) Social strategies such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers and becoming culturally aware (items 45-50)

Data analysis

All data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to reveal female and male specific strategies that they employed the most , the least and neutrally in EFL learning. To address the two overstated hypothesis, comparisons were made to identify the possible significant factors and gender variations in the mean of frequency use of the six categories of the SILL. A quantitative approach was carried out to test the differences between the two proficiency groups.

Results and discussions

The SILL questionnaire findings *(Pre - intermediate controlled group)*

Implementing the SILL- questionnaire in the present study resulted to be useful as the language learning strategies it presented enabled students (males and females) to gain responsibility for their own progress in English. Besides, it addressed individual learning styles in relation to each participant`s language skills. The comparisons made on the gender frequency indicated that males and females had in common usage 19 out of 50 strategies in the English language learning.

However, concerning Memory Strategies, overall males reported mostly neutral (2/3) and the remaining part reported as non users of various strategies such as: in memorizing new words by using rhymes, flashcards; physically acting out new words; or reviewing lessons often. On the other hand, females reported to be half in number of neutral usage and the other half in positive use of the overall presented strategies in Part A of the SILL questionnaire. Thus, females by being half moderate and half high strategy users in memorizing the new words in English, when compared to males, positioned themselves in a higher advantage in achieving L_2 mastery in the mental vocabulary.

Additionally, differences persist concerning responses on Cognitive Strategies in Part B reporting males to be mostly moderate strategy users and the rest as high strategy users. Whereas females reported to be mostly high strategy users and a small part moderate ones. Besides, females gained slighter advantages over males in using more often strategies such as: practicing sounds of SL, watching SL TV shows, reading for pleasure in the SL, trying to find patterns in it, or making summaries of information either heard or read in SL (English). Whereas, males were found to be less profound in reasoning, analyzing or practicing strategies compared to the females` extent beyond contextual circumstances.

However, results concerning Compensation Strategies in Part C revealed similarities rather than differences when comparing both gendered responses. They resulted to be for the most part high strategy users and to a slight extent moderate strategy ones. Both genders reported making up new words either by guessing meaning from contexts or using synonyms to convey meaning of the new lexicon.

Statistically, similarities in strategy use indicated both genders to be high strategy users even in Metacognitive and Social Strategies. Only a small part of both males and females resulted to be moderate strategy users of Part D and F on the SILL. Female students outperformed males in being overwhelmingly (2/3) of the total number when compared to males (1/2) of the total number in the frequency of strategy use. Thus, females reported using often strategies such as: evaluating one`s progress, planning for language tasks, searching for practice opportunities and moreover monitoring errors. Whereas males on the opposite, favored following route ways of learning the new lexicon, evaluated their own progress but neglected error correction either by themselves or other speakers. On the opposite, females demanded clarifications and cooperation with native speakers to coin new words and develop their competence in L_2 mastery.

Finally, responses concerning Affective Strategies reported both genders to use them as the least frequent in English language learning. Despite the same strategy ranking, males resulted to be extremely diverse in comparison to females` strategies employed in Part E. They reported to use in various degrees these strategies by responding in equal proportions from 1 up to 5, thus revealing their diversity as an overall gender group but also as specific individual members within each gendered group. This means that in general,

male students employed various strategies for anxiety reduction, self-encouragement and self-reward. Each of these strategies embodied specific features in terms of learner individual differences, different learning styles that affected to a great extent their diversity in the strategy choice. Whereas, females reported themselves in a vast majority, as high strategy users in a proportion of 2/3 of the total number of them by being more reflective, analytic, impulsive, and extroverted than overall males. For a precise view of the differences in the gendered strategy use see the Table.2 which presents the ranking order of rate language learning strategy group (female and male) usage as reported by the SILL.

Table . 2

Ranking order	Male	Female
6 (most frequent)	Metacognitive	Social
5	Social	Metacognitive
4	Compensation	Cognitive
3	Cognitive	Memory
2	Memory	Compensation
1 (least frequent)	Affective	Affective

The SILL questionnaire findings (*Intermediate controlled group)*

Results from the SILL-questionnaire of the Intermediate proficiency level showed that the students in general had a significant influence on the use of the most part of them .They were found to have in common usage 28 out of 50 strategies. Responses concerning Memory Strategies indicated that males were in a vast majority moderate in using them, and a small minority reported to be high strategy users. They used strategies in memorizing new words such as making sentences to contextualize the meaning, or by remembering their location on the page, board or street sign. Referring to the Memory Strategies, females reported themselves in equal proportions to be moderate users in half of these strategies and high strategy users in the other half. Their positive responses indicated that they favored most in memorizing new words strategies such as thinking of the relationships of what they knew and the new things they learned and also related the mental picture or image to the new words. Besides they often utilized revisions to remember their precise location in authentic language or contexts. Whereas, males resulted to just store words mechanically neglecting the words' semantics and pragmatics in other specific settings.

Concerning the Cognitive Strategies females reported to be high strategy users thus outperforming males in implementing an overwhelming majority of the involved strategies. They favored them as considered *helpful ways* in strengthening all their mental processes, in understanding and using better the target language. Whereas, males' responses indicated that half of them were moderate users and the other half high strategy users. Moreover, males reported using frequently strategies such as: skimming, guessing, finding the meaning of a word by dividing it into parts to understand it. In addition, females reported practicing the sounds of the English language and finding patterns in the language.

Eventually, concerning Compensation Strategies females reported themselves in a greater majority as high strategy users and in an insignificant minority as moderate users of the Part C of the SILL. Males, on the contrary, reported to be in a vast majority moderate users and in a small proportion as high strategy users on the item 29 with the statement

that they used a synonym or a phrase to describe something when they could not think of the exact word in English. On the opposite, females' responses indicated them to be able to make up for the gaps in their knowledge and skill. Since they represent a higher level of proficiency when compared to Pre-intermediate female group they also utilized guessing meanings from the context bur neglected using gestures to convey meaning.

Procedurally, gender differences did not occur concerning Metacognitive Strategies. The overwhelming part of both genders reported themselves as high strategy users. Specifically males responded to 4 (Usually true of me) answers whereas females responded to 4 and mostly 5 (Always or almost true of me) answers. The overall techniques they utilized in Metacognitive Strategies consisted on finding ways of learning the new English lexicon, aimed at helping students in being more organized in this process by setting goals and looking for opportunities that would resolutely identify them as eloquent speakers of the English language.

Additionally, no significant differences in strategy use were found concerning Affective strategies. Both genders resulted to be low strategy users thus not using the presented special steps to help them manage "negative" emotions, such as nervousness, anxiety, tension, fear, disappointment and discouragement. Statistically, only a minor part of males and females reported using relaxing ways when being afraid, encouraging oneself to use the target language, rewarding oneself or being aware on one`s nervousness. However, overwhelmingly both genders reported to be low strategy users in writing down feelings in a journal, and telling others how one feels. Throughout the entire SILL questionnaire the Affective Strategies in both controlled groups resulted to be the least frequency used strategies by both genders.

Despite the overstated similarities that existed between males and females on some of the strategies, differences in strategy frequency were found in both genders. Thus, concerning the Social Strategies females outperformed males by reporting themselves as totally high strategy users. Whereas, males reported to be in a proportion of 1/3 moderate strategy users and the remaining part as high strategy ones. Eventually differences prevailed with the statements that males did not ask other SL speakers to help in understanding words or allowing others to correct when conversing in English. Subsequently females, tended to be more positive and persistent in their readiness for cooperating with native speakers and become culturally aware of the structured and complex language system of English as an international communicative language. For a clear view of the engendered variations in terms of the proficiency controlled groups' level see the Table 3 .

Table. 3

Ranking order		Male	Female
6	(most frequent)	Metacognitive	Cognitive
5		Social	Social
4		Cognitive	Metacogntive
3		Compensation	Compensation
2		Memory	Memory
1	(least frequent)	Affective	Affective

Conclusions
Research Hypothesis

The whole research study developed within the borders of the two overstated hypothesis which were put forward to shed light on the gender differences that existed or not among our freshman university students at the Economic Faculty, in Korca Albania. For ease of review they were as following:

Hypothesis I - Female university students employ more strategies than male university students in EFL learning.

Hypothesis II - More proficient university language learners use a greater variety and often a great number of language learning strategies in EFL learning.

Eventually, the present study produced many interesting results by presenting the striking similarities and differences extracted in strategy use among males and females in each proficiency controlled group. Mostly similarities were found within each group's participants, whereas differences resulted between both proficiency groups. Overall males and females of Pre-intermediate level had in a common usage 19 out of 50 strategies, which no doubt reflected their variations in language learning styles in EFL. As it was observed from the abovementioned analyses *Hypothesis I* resulted to be true. Meanwhile, males and females of Intermediate level had in a common usage 28 out of 50 strategies. Considering the present SILL findings provided so with convenient research analysis, the validity of *Hypothesis II* made good sense too. Analyses of the SILL questionnaire revealed that more proficient language learners (in this case Intermediate male and female students altogether) used a greater variety of strategies and also a greater number of them when compared to Pre- intermediate male and female students. As a result the validity of the *statement* that: the higher the proficiency, the more positive the views, the more confident and the more motivated both genders; *remains* completely true. Consequently, employing these strategies in EFL learning, male and female students addressed themselves in raising their awareness, in exploring different learning strategies, in evaluating, experimenting and delving into authentic oral and written input. Eventually they got involved in self-stimulation: to choose their specific set of effective strategies, to promote achievement in L_2 mastery and to foster success in academic learning.

Overall research findings of the present study yield similarly on the conclusion that the overstated gender differences are related to task demands and contextual motivation. As anticipated, it was observed higher overall strategy use by females than by males where females dominated in mostly positive attitudes towards English language learning, whereas males reported to be neither low nor high frequent users of the present SILL strategies. Besides, it was found significantly greater overall use of language learning strategies among more successful learners (Intermediate learners). About 54 % of the individual strategies on the SILL were used more frequently by more successful students which will prevail them in obtaining satisfactorily achievements as unique competent English language learners and speakers as well.

Implications and recommendations on teaching

Since the participants of the present study were students at the Economic Faculty which utilize the English language for specific purposes, the study' s outcomes presented the real circumstances they appeared to be during the entire process. It proved the reliability

of some evidence constructed from various researches in various institutional contexts and participants as well. The practical effectiveness of it stands on the implementation of the worldwide known instrument, the SILL questionnaire that was found by the teacher's observation and the student's responses appropriate to view the complex process of the English language learning. Besides, it proved the vital use of approaches in developing the students' own metacognition about themselves as strategic learners to surpass their current level of achievement into a more advanced EFL mastery, minimizing to the maximum differences that they themselves encountered during the English language process. Eventually, they strived hard to get to the highest extent communicative language skills to obtain fluency in thinking, speaking and writing. Learning and language learning happen through communication. Thus, it is crucial that the teachers encourage all gendered access to perform their linguistic competence as the variable in question "gender", is seen as a possible predictor in EFL learning. It influences to a great extent language learning in areas of speech production and communicative fluency. Thus, educators working with male and female students should be aware of their unique learning styles and therefore maximize the group`s tendency for higher levels of self motivation, self-correction, persistence and responsibility to improve and develop positive language learning strategies which would finally yield to satisfactory achievements in EFL. Besides, it is important for educators to maintain and increase the learners` self confidence so that they gain the so-called "Learner autonomy", a prevailing feature of academic students. What is expected at the end of the teaching process is no doubt the accomplishment of an independent interaction of the learners themselves with the learning materials. Teachers can foster to all kinds of foreign language learners the view that regardless the learner's engendered characteristics, Communicative Language Competence (CLT), is a changeable aspect of development, obtained under precise and continuous educational instructions. It is important to plan and evaluate subsequent foreign language learning by employing appropriate strategies in this complex process. Thus, consolidating and practicing the English language skills simultaneously intermingled in the SILL, provided great leaps of advancement in EFL as this was the major purpose of conducting this research among ESP students at Korça University, Economic Faculty.

Finally, based on the SIIL implementation as a significant research instrument and on its findings, results and conclusions, the present study can serve as evidence for all kinds of EFL teachers (pre-service and in- service), students at all kinds of proficiency level and curriculum designers to investigate the foreign language learning process with respect to gender at university level. Given the great number of students that learn English as a foreign language in various institutional contexts all over the world, we believe that there is always a tendency to bring novices for practicality, authenticity and professionalism, and view whether the same gender tendencies appear in various EFL learning contexts.

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