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LATVIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION STUDENT FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Abstract. *The study focused on the frequencies of Latvian higher education institution student self-reported foreign language learning strategies. From the 86 participants 44 were males and 42 – females; sport science was studied by 48 respondents, and health care by 38; 44.20% were freshmen and 55.80% - sophomores; 76.70% were full-time and 23.30% – part-time students. The study employed the Strategy Inventory for Foreign Language Learning (SILL), consisting of 50 statements divided into 6 categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective. One statement from the memory strategies was removed, as it was considered non-relevant for the students. Likert scale of three choices - never, sometimes and often – was used. SPSS Version 26 was used for the data analysis. Results: 1) the investigated students tended to use cognitive (mean =2.12; st.dev.=0.29; min,=1,43; max.=3) and compensation (mean =2.11; st.dev.=0.36; min.=1,33; max.=2.83) strategies more often; 2) the students tended to use affective (mean =1.78; st.dev.=0.39; min.=1.00; max.=2.67) strategies less often; Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed that compensation strategies are used more often than memory strategies (Z=5.08; Sig. =0.00) and metacognitive strategies were used more often than affective strategies (Z=5.00; Sig. =0.00).*
Keywords: *health care students, HEIs (higher education institutions), sport science students, Strategy Inventory for Foreign Language Learning (SILL).*

Introduction

The aim of the study is to gauge the strategies of learning a foreign language in a Latvian HEI before embarking on to full-scale research. In our first article on strategy use (Rudzinska & Jakovleva, 2019) the focus was on investigating self-reported foreign language learning strategies across four skills – listening, speaking, writing and reading, using language Learning Strategy Inventory, developed in CARLA Center (Kappler, Cohen, & Paige, 2009). The results showed that both sport science and health care students were aware of the

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strategies and used them extensively; however, significant differences between the use of strategies by the students of the two programmes were found.

The present study does not compare the students the two programmes; instead, it focuses on the whole sample and investigates the students' self-reported frequency of the use of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990).

Literature review

In the 1970s, scientists revealed that language learning is closely related to cognitive processes. In the 1990s the education paradigm changed, with the focus shifting from passive learners to active learners. Leading researchers hold the view that learning strategies facilitate self-directed active learning (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot; 1990; Cohen, 2003, 2011). Moreover, Riazi argues that "it might be reasonable to help students in classrooms appreciate the use … of strategies" (Riazi, 2008, p. 439).

The European Union Guidelines on language learning, for example, the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR) in Language Learning, Producing and Testing acknowledges in the introductory part that "Europe action based approach ... takes into account the cognitive, emotional, and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent" (CEFR, 2001, p. 10). However, the CEFR concentrates basically on language learning and production skills – reading, listening, writing and speaking. Thus, it can be concluded that affective, cognitive, social and partly metacognitive approach are not formulated into language learning strategies. Meanwhile, the Companion Volume of New Descriptors (Council of Europe; 2018) replaces the descriptors of four language skills and lists appropriate strategies for carrying out the language tasks to be accomplished (Danko & Dečman, 2019).

The Strategy Inventory for Foreign Language Learning (SILL tool) has been developed by Oxford in 1990 (Oxford, 1990) and has been in use for more than 30 years. It consists of 50 language learning strategies, summarized into 6 categories – memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective. Memory strategies are concerned with information storing and retrieval, cognitive strategies – with understanding and producing language, compensation strategies – with guessing and interlocution processes in producing the required language, metacognitive strategies – with thinking about one's own learning, social strategies – with benefitting from others, and affective – with coping with one's emotions in the learning process.

Conducting investigations about language learning strategies, the researchers use Oxford's original questionnaire with 50 strategies and 5 Likert scale options for answers, ranging from 1 "never or almost never true of me" to

5 "always or almost always true of me" (Bremner, 1998; Riazi, 2008; Vertongen, 2014-2015, Danko & Dečman, 2019). Other investigators, however, reduce the number of Likert scale options, offering the students to reply to strategy use statements with the options from "never" to "sometimes" (Bessai, 2018). Considering the reliability of the SLIL tool in the form of Cronbach's alpha, the researchers report it as being very high and high – for example, .92 (Bremner, 1998; Riazi, 2008).

Considering the appropriateness of the language learning strategy use in the contemporary situation, Danko and Dečman (2019) argue that such strategies as the use of flashcards or rhymes from Oxford's original questionnaire have been overtaken using modern information technology. Nonetheless, they acknowledge that some authors claim that kinaesthetic students might enjoy working with tangible objects (Oxford, 2003, p. 273).

Oxford's questionnaire has been used in a variety of learning situations and cultural contexts. Bremner finds that compensation and metacognitive strategies were used most of all, while affective and memory strategies were the least used ones (1998). Danko and Dečman (2019) and Wu (2008) also report that affective strategies were the least used ones. Danko and Dečman suggest that the role of affective strategies was more obvious at lower levels of proficiency.

Riazi concludes that language learning strategies seem to be part of the students' learning experience and reported that the general categories used in the order from the highest to the lowest were as follows: metacognitive, cognitive, compensation, social, memory, and affective. This result contrasts with studies about Asian students, which have reported high memory strategy use. However, the departure from route-learning to deep approach in learning has been recently observed in non-Western countries as well.

Bremner (1998) suggests that affective strategies are not strategies for learning but characteristics among low level learners. Vertongen (2014-2015) has observed that proficient language learners have less need of compensation strategies. Riazi (2008) emphasized the importance of the use of social strategies, especially in the after-Covid era.

Bremner (1998) argues that cognitive strategies could be related to higher proficiency level in English. Vertongen (2014-2015), on the other hand, concludes that the researchers should rather look at strategies as the output of proficiency instead of tools to enhance it. Riazi (2008) believes that higher level students do not use fewer strategies, but rather the strategies are internalized, and the learners use them automatically.

Methodology

This study uses descriptive research approach aimed at describing foreign language learning strategy characteristics. The study employs the Strategy

Inventory for Foreign Language Learning (SILL) tool (Oxford, 1990), consisting of fifty statements, divided into six categories – memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective. However, the original SILL tool was slightly modified. Following Danko and Dečman (2019), who argued for the necessity to exclude the statement "I use flashcards to remember new English words" in the SILL, this strategy was removed from the memory strategies, considering it non-relevant for the participants, who were university students. Therefore, the final questionnaire consisted of 49 statements. The next adaptation concerns the five Likert-scale choices. Similarly, to Bessai (2018), we consider it sufficient to employ only three, namely, "never" (1), "sometimes" (2), and "often" (3).

Relying on the proven high command of English among the LASE students, the SILL questionnaire of 49 items was not translated into Latvia.

Descriptive data analysis was carried out with the help of SPSS Version 26. To assess the reliability of the SILL scale, we were guided by the Cronbach's Alpha value.

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test showed that only some strategies follow normal distribution (Sig.>0.05). As a back-up test for the t-Test, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used to find the differences in the use of different strategy groups.

Participants

Convenience sampling, consisting of the students easily available during the two week session time – from January 16 to January 22, 2023 in a Latvian HEI, and willing to participate in the study, was used in the study.

Eighty-six surveys were eligible from the distributed ninety ones. 44 respondents were males, and 42 – females. 55.80% of the respondents were sport science students, and 44.20% - health care students. 76.70% were full-time and 23.30% - part-time students; 44.20% were Year 1 and 55.80% – Year 2 students.

Research results

All six language learning strategy groups are represented in Table 1. Descriptive statistics results are shown in the form of mean and standard deviation, as well as minimal and maximal values of the strategy groups.

Table 1 shows that the mean value of the strategies in the scale of 1 to 3 was from 1.87 to 2.12, so the conclusion can be made that the strategies are used relatively widely.

Cognitive (mean =2.12; st. dev.=0.29; min.=1,43; max.=3) and compensation (mean =2.11; st. dev.=0.36; min.=1,33; max.=2.83) strategies were reported to be used more often, and affective (mean =1.78; st.dev.=0.39;

min.=1.00; max.=2.67) – less often than the other ones.

Table 1 ***Strategy group descriptive statistics*** *(made by authors)*

Strategy category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Memory	85	1.87	0.33	1.00	3.00
Cognitive	86	2.12	0.29	1.43	3.00
Metacognitive	86	2.05	0.39	1.22	2.89
Affective	86	1.78	0.39	1.00	2.67
Social	86	1.93	0.42	1.17	3.00
Compensation	86	2.11	0.36	1.33	2.83

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test shows that compensation strategies were used more often than memory strategies (Z=5.08; Sig. =0.00) and metacognitive strategies – more often than affective strategies (Z=5.00; Sig. =0.00).

Strategy groups and individual strategies are discussed below in more detail.

Memory strategies

Characteristics of the memory strategies are shown in the form of the mean value, which was 1.87, and standard deviation, which was 0.33; minimal value of the scale was 1.00. It is interesting to note that there was one student who reported that he has never used any memory strategy.

The least often used memory strategies were “I use rhymes to remember new English words” and “I physically act out new English words.” For these strategies, the value of mode was 1, while for the other strategies it was 2.

Cognitive strategies

The mean value of the scale of cognitive strategies was 2.12, standard deviation - .39. The minimum value was 1.43, and the maximum value – 3. This means that students tend to use cognitive strategies; there are no students who never use any cognitive strategy.

The most frequently used memory strategies were “I'm not afraid to start a conversation in English” and “I watch English language TV shows or movies spoken in English without Latvian subtitles.” For these strategies, the value of the mode was 3, while for the other strategies it was 2.

Compensation strategies

The mean value of the scale was 2.11, standard deviation - .36. the minimum value of the scale was 1.33, and the maximum value was 2.83. This indicates that students use compensation strategies relatively often. On the other hand, there are no students who use all the six compensation strategies often.

From compensation strategies, the most often used the following was "I try to guess what the other person will say next in English." For this strategy, the mode was 3, while for the other strategies it was 2.

Affective strategies

The mean value of the scale was 1.78, standard deviation - .39. The minimum value of the scale was 1.00, the maximum value was 2.67. This shows that students do not use affective strategies widely; there are some students who never use any affective strategy.

The most frequently used strategy was "I try to guess what the other person will say next in English." The mode was 3 for this strategy, while for the other strategies it was 2 and 1.

The least frequently employed strategies (mode=1) were "I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English," "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary" and "I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English."

Metacognitive strategies

The mean value of the scale was 2. 05, standard deviation .39.

The minimum value of the scale was 1.22, and the maximum value was 2.89. This suggests that the students used metacognitive strategies widely; there were no students who never used any metacognitive strategy.

The most frequently used strategies (mode = 3) were "I pay attention when someone is speaking English" and "I try to find out how to be a better learner of English." The least frequently used strategy (mode=1) was "I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English."

Social strategies

The mean value of the scale was 1.3, the standard deviation was .42.

The minimum value of the scale was 1.17, and the maximum value was 3.00. This indicates that the students widely used social strategies; there were no students who never used any social strategy, but neither there were students who often used all the six social strategies.

The least used strategy (mode=1) was "I practice English with other students outside the classroom."

Table 2 ***Self-reported use of language learning strategies*** *(made by authors)*

No.	Strategy category	Strategy statement	Mean	st. dev.
1.	Memory strategies	I think about the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn.	2.15	.52
2.		I use new English words in a sentence so that I can remember them.	2.05	.57
3.		I connect the sound of a new English word with a picture of it in my head to help me remember the word.	1.98	.78
4.		I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	1.90	.69
5.		I use rhymes to remember new English words.	1.57	.73
6.		I physically act out new English words.	1.52	.63
7.		I often review English lessons.	1.66	.64
8.		I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	2.08	.72
9.	Cognitive strategies	I say or write new English words several times.	1.93	.76
10.		I try to talk like native English speakers.	2.20	.70
11.		I practice the sounds of English.	2.12	.69
12.		I use the English words I know in different contexts.	2.34	.64
13.		I'm not afraid to start a conversation in English.	2.41	.66
14.		I watch English language TV shows or movies spoken in English without Latvian subtitles.	2.63	.61
15.		I read for pleasure in English.	2.03	.68
16.		I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	2.26	.67
17.		I first skim an English passage, then go back and read carefully.	1.93	.67
18.		I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	1.94	.76
19.		I try to find patterns in English.	1.79	.65

20.		I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	2.00	.72
21.		I try not to translate word-for-word.	2.21	.65
22.		I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	1.88	.66
23.	Compensation strategies	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	2.06	.68
24.		When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	2.01	.73
25.		I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	1.90	.78
26.		I read English without looking up every new word.	2.28	.70
27.		I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	2.02	.83
28.		If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	2.41	.60
29.	Metacognitive strategies	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	2.30	,63
30.		I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	2.38	.62
31.		I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	2.51	.65
32.		I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	2.16	.80
33.		I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	1.52	.61
34.		I look for people I can talk to in English.	1.91	.71
35.		I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	1.90	.72
36.		I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	1.86	.69
37.		I think about my progress in learning English.	1.93	.70
38.	Affective strategies	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	1.86	.74
39.		I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	2.28	.73
40.		I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	1.67	.73
41.		I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	1.81	.68

42.		I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	1.50	.68
43.		I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	1.53	.73
44.	Social strategies	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	2.31	.74
45.		I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	1.97	.76
46.		I practice English with other students outside the classroom.	1.69	.71
47.		I ask for help from English speakers.	1.88	.77
48.		I ask questions related to the acquisition of English in English.	1.80	.61
49.		I try to learn about the cultural contexts in which English is used around the world.	1.92	.67

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings show that language learning strategies are used extensively by the students. The students who participated in the survey reported to use the cognitive and compensation strategies more often, and the affective strategies – less often. As can be seen from the students' choices, compensation strategies were used more often than memory strategies and metacognitive strategies were used more often than affective strategies.

The results comply with the existing research about language learning strategy use in universities. Similarly to the conclusions reached by Bremner (1998) and Riazi (2008), the sport science and health care students were most likely to use cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies, and, similarly to the findings of Danko and Dečman (2019) and Wu (2008), the LASE learners were the least likely to use affective strategies.

One unexpected finding was that one of the two the least frequently used memory strategies was "I physically act out new English words." The finding was surprising, given the fact that the respondents – sports science and health care students – are likely to possess high bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence.

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