CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

The English language today has become the principal language of the world. This has led to an increasing concern about the improvement of education in the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language. The aims of teaching have shifted from being teacher-centred to learner-centred, from examining the product (what students learn), to examining the process (how students learn). The learner's involvement in the learning process is now emphasized. The concepts of learner strategies and learner autonomy have become central issues in discussions and research.

An understanding of students' learning strategies provides researchers with insights not only into the overall process of second language acquisition but also into the strategies of successful and unsuccessful learners. Understanding such type of strategies can help determine both the characteristics of the successful learners, and the procedures they follow at different levels in order to acquire the skills required.

Studies have addressed a wide range of factors that affect learning strategy's choice. These factors include context, gender, major field of study, age, and proficiency level of the learner (Johnson & Newport, 1995; Bedell & Oxford, 1996; Kaylani, 1996; Embi, 1999; Mingyuan, 2000). This study examines in some detail all of the above factors with a special emphasis on the environmental factor. In the choice of learning strategies, the environmental factor is the variable that has been frequently considered in discussions of individual differences (Bedell & Oxford, 1996). Research on ESL learning strategies - where learners learn English in an English speaking environment -

and EFL - where learners learn English in their native country - highlights the importance of understanding strategies used by learners. Awareness of learner strategies aids second and foreign language learning; it enhances the efficiency with which learners might approach their goals and reduces the barriers that hinder language learning. As Oxford et al. (1996:19) aptly suggest:

> Students derive the maximum benefit from language learning strategies in developing language skills when they and their teachers are aware of and pay attention to these strategies.

1.1 Background to the Study

Saudi Arabia is one of the Gulf countries. Its major ethnic group is the Arabs as they consist of 90% of the population, the other 10% are Afro-Asian. The national and official language is Arabic. English is studied as a foreign language; it is not used as a medium of everyday communication, rather it is a required subject acquired in an artificial setting which is the English classroom.

Education in Saudi Arabia is not compulsory, but it is free to all, textbooks and health services for students included. The spread of education is dependent on availability of schools in the various regions. It has progressed rapidly and extensively since the unification of Saudi Arabia (1932). Before that, it was confined to religious schools and a number of mosques.

Boys' schools are separate from girls' schools in the kingdom. The Ministry of Education is responsible for boys' education all over the country at all levels, elementary, intermediate and secondary. General and vocational education which is divided into technical, commercial and agricultural schools falls under its supervision. In addition, the Ministry is responsible for adults' education and private schools which

exist mainly in the larger cities and teach the same curriculum and use the same books that are used in the public sector.

Girls' education was one of the major concerns of the kingdom leadership. In 1960 a special department for girls' education known as the "General Presidency for Girls' Education" was established. The Presidency is responsible for this type of education up till the end of the secondary school. In addition to this, women's literacy programmes and some colleges of education fall under its supervision. In 2002, the General Presidency was fully merged into the Ministry of Education.

The school system consists of the Elementary level that lasts for six years. This is followed by three years of Intermediate level followed by another three years of Secondary level. During the first year of secondary level, students share a common curriculum. In the two final years, they are divided into science or literary stream. Students scoring 60% in all first year subjects may choose between the two streams. Those who score under 60% are automatically put in the literary stream.

Saudi schools used to teach English in Grade Seven which is the first year of the Intermediate level. Then there was a new plan that introduced teaching English as a main subject in Grade Six for boys and girls, beginning from the 2004/ 2005 academic year. There are also other plans to improve the teaching of English at the Intermediate and Secondary levels by updating the curricula, enhancing the competence of teachers and using modern technologies.

Tertiary education in Saudi Arabia which has expanded at a remarkable pace is provided by universities, higher institutes, and teachers and technical colleges. The

Ministry of Higher Education is responsible for all the universities in the kingdom. These universities are for males but with separate branches for females.

The medium of instruction at the higher levels is Arabic and English except at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals where the instruction is in English only. In the other universities English is largely confined to technological disciplines. In general, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is advancing in accordance to five-year plans aimed at adequate general education at all levels nation wide.

1.1.1 A Brief Profile of King Khalid University

In 1998, the branches of King Saud University and Imam Muhammed bin Saud Islamic University in Abha, in the Asir region were joined to form the University of King Khalid. The University is comprised of twelve faculties. There are three requirements for admission into King Khalid University: students should be Saudis, they should hold the Secondary Certificate "Tawjihiya" or an equivalent qualification, and they must have the specified score required by the different departments. The university offers bachelor's, master's and doctor's degrees. The bachelor's degree is conferred after four years, except for Pharmacy, and Medicine which take five years. English is the medium of instruction in technological and scientific fields, whereas all other subjects are taught in Arabic.

1.1.2 The English Language Programme at King Khalid University

In the first two years in the University, all students have to attend intensive courses in English offered by the English Language Department. All four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught in these courses. Furthermore, as many students leave secondary school with little or no knowledge on study skills, the English

Language Department at King Khalid University offers a course in study skills for English majors. This course focuses on teaching students techniques in note taking, summarizing, memory and concentration, using the dictionary and mastering the strategies of speaking, reading and writing. Despite these intensive courses in English, students are not sufficiently proficient to comprehend lectures in English. This situation may be explained by the existing gap between the language curriculum at the secondary school and what is actually demanded at the university level. In secondary schools, the duration of exposure to the English language is limited to five hours a week. On the other hand, students at the university level have greater exposure to English; they have more opportunities to hear English being used and to use it themselves. Furthermore, reading skill and grammar receive most of the attention in the language curriculum in secondary schools followed by writing, then listening, and finally, speaking skill that receives the least attention. On the other hand, all four skills receive equal attention at the university level. In addition to that, audio-visual aids, which are an integral part of the learning situation, are inadequate in secondary schools causing the teaching and thus the learning process to suffer.

The direct method which is often used in teaching the English language at the university level encourages the students to think in the target language. No translation is allowed. When teachers introduce a new target language word, they demonstrate its meaning through the use of pictures, gestures, examples or other means. Students are not allowed to speak or communicate in Arabic in class. They may ask questions in Arabic but are likely to be answered in English. In this way, students acquire vocabulary more naturally through the use of full sentences as compared to merely memorizing word lists.

English is also the medium of instruction for most of the programmes in the female campus at King Khalid University. However, Arabic is the medium of instruction for the programme of study leading to the Bachelor of Science degree. Nevertheless, all the students are required to attend intensive English language courses offered by the Department of English Language. The goal of these courses is to assist students to upgrade their English language proficiency in grammar, reading, writing, listening and speaking. These English language courses are divided into three levels of proficiency: elementary, lower intermediate and upper intermediate. Each level comprises one-semester courses which are intensive in nature.

These intensive courses aim at enabling students to understand and use the grammar of English accurately and communicatively. On the other hand, reading comprehension courses introduce students to authentic texts covering a wide range of topics including global, Islamic, social, educational, political and scientific issues. These reading courses aim to provide students with practice in the techniques of skimming and scanning, identifying the main idea of the text, understanding text organization, guessing from context and evaluating the author's attitude. In terms of writing, students learn essay writing, covering elements such as paragraph development and organization, coherence and unity. Students are given practice in various forms of essays such as descriptive, argumentative, compare and contrast and cause and effect. Finally, listening and speaking courses aim at helping students recognize shifts in meaning caused by stress and intonation, improve note taking and develop oral skills such as making requests, telling a short story, describing an event, discussing a problem and agreeing and disagreeing.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Context difference affects nearly every area of learning, and understanding these differences opens a number of doors to better education. Oxford (1996) stresses the influence of context on strategy use. She points out that there are hundreds of foreign and second language learning strategies. Identifying these strategies can offer keen insight into the process of language learning for both EFL and ESL students. Since English is the primary medium of instruction in various departments at King Khalid University, students strive to develop sufficient proficiency in English in order to cope with their studies and for their future career. However, despite the intensive courses in English, some students are not sufficiently proficient in English to comprehend lectures or summarize or take notes during lectures. Furthermore, it is apparent from the examination results that students in specific major fields of study such as Medicine and Computer Science are better in learning English. Thus, being aware of the learning strategies used by EFL students and their relationship to factors such as major field of study, and proficiency level, may benefit the learners, teachers and researchers. When there is some degree of understanding on how a learner actually learns, the findings can be utilized in classroom teaching and material preparation.

1.3 Objectives and Research Questions

This study was conducted with the purpose of identifying the English language learning strategies used by female EFL undergraduate students. The findings can be adapted into present teaching methods that may help students attain a higher degree of successful foreign language learning. This study also aimed to determine whether the learning strategies exhibited by female EFL undergraduate students vary according to major field of study and English language performance level. Finally, the purpose of this study was

as well to specify the English language learning strategies that were associated with the four language skills.

In meeting the objectives, the following research questions are addressed:

1. Of the fifty learning strategies outlined under the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990), which are the main strategies used by female EFL undergraduates?

2. Does the female EFL undergraduates' major field of study influence their choice of language learning strategies?

3. Does the female EFL undergraduates' performance level in the English language influence their choice of language learning strategies?

4. Which English language learning strategies used by the female EFL undergraduates are associated with each of the four language skills?

1.4 Significance of the Study

According to Wittrock (1988:289):

> By becoming aware of learning strategies, by measuring them, by naming them and by trying to teach them to students, we believe that we can enhance learning in class and also performance on the job.

Learning strategy research is important because it helps learners and especially the less effective ones to improve their ability to learn and to use the strategy that would maximise their learning. The application of learning strategies can facilitate the acquisition of different language skills (Chamot, 1987; O'Malley, 1987; Winden, 1987; Dreyer & Oxford, 1996). An understanding of students' learning strategies can help pave the way for preparation of course materials and upgrading of teaching and learning processes to best suit the learners. Research has shown that the environmental factor has a tremendous influence on learning strategies. Oxford (1996) indicates that

environmental factors such as cultural background affects strategy choice, and understanding the cross-cultural similarities and differences in language learning strategies is useful for foreign and second language teachers.

Thus, the present study provides a more detailed picture than that of previous ones firstly, by examining variation in the use of individual strategies, the overall strategy, and strategy categories, and secondly, by looking for patterns of variations in ESL / EFL contexts, major field of study, and performance level in the English language. Therefore, this study integrates the separate work performed in the foreign language context by identifying the English language learning strategies preferred by undergraduate EFL learners (i.e. Saudis). The findings provide information that enhances students' awareness of their learning strategy preferences and help teachers who need to be aware of their students' learning strategy preferences. Furthermore this study helps teachers develop a more "culture-sensitive pedagogy". In which teachers are able to use students' cultural background as a starting point to build further learning. Thus, the findings of this study will make a valuable contribution to the field of language learning strategy in the foreign language context.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

This study provides some clear description about the strategies used in foreign language learning. The subjects of this study were intended to initially include both male and female students. But as both male and female students study in separate campuses and there is no co-education in Saudi Arabia, the study was restricted to female students only. A major limitation of the study was that, it was confined to first and second year undergraduates. This was due to the recent establishment of the Female Centre as courses were only offered for first and second year students so far. Other limitation of

the study can be attributed to the observational method used. Class observations yielded limited information about learning strategies. In the teacher-centred classrooms, students have few opportunities to engage in active learning with observable strategies. Another limitation of the study lies in the scope and range of learning strategies of poor language learners. The study could not include the analysis of learning strategies used by poor language learners, which might help in the explanation of the relationship between the use of learning strategy and proficiency level. This was due to the very limited number of failures as only two students failed in the achievement test of English.

1.6 Conclusion

This study is presented in five chapters: Chapter 1 presents the background information which provides the context for the study. It gives a general description of the purposes of the study and lists the research questions. It highlights how the study will contribute to the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature that provides readers with the theoretical foundation and applied perspectives of this study. It begins with a brief account of the learning strategy in general. It then moves on to discuss six areas in the field of language learning strategy; first, the distinction between the term strategy and other terms, second, the differing criteria for classifying language learning strategies in early literature and recent ones, third, the language learning strategies associated with the four language skills, fourth, the linking of learning strategies to other variables such as context, gender, major field of study, age and the English language performance level, fifth, the role of learning strategies in the language acquisition process, sixth, the techniques and methods used in the teaching of learning strategies according to theoretical and applied perspectives. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and design of the study and explains

the data gathering procedures which include the use of questionnaire, observation, interview, and achievement test. The data analysis procedures and the empirical results of the study are reported in Chapter 4. The discussion and the major findings generated from the data analysis are reported in Chapter 5.