

Chapter Five: Summary, Implications and Recommendations

5.0: Overview

This study was carried out in order to explore factors that influence proficient and less proficient EFL learners' learning strategies. This chapter is divided into four major sections. The first section discusses summary of the study where conclusions are made based on the findings in Chapter Four. The study also highlights the implications of the findings on theory, methodology and pedagogy, which will be discussed in this chapter. In addition, the research gives recommendations for future research.

5.1: Summary of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate factors that influence the choice of learning strategies by proficient and less proficient learners of EFL. Individual differences play a major role in language learning strategies. Thus, language learners (the participants) selected certain strategies in learning or acquiring English language skills. The summary of this study is illustrated in Figure 5.1 (a). Based on Figure 5.1 (a), nine factors were identified as major contributors to the choice of learning strategies by both the proficient and less proficient learners.

Figure 5.1 (a): Flow Chart of the Summary of the Study

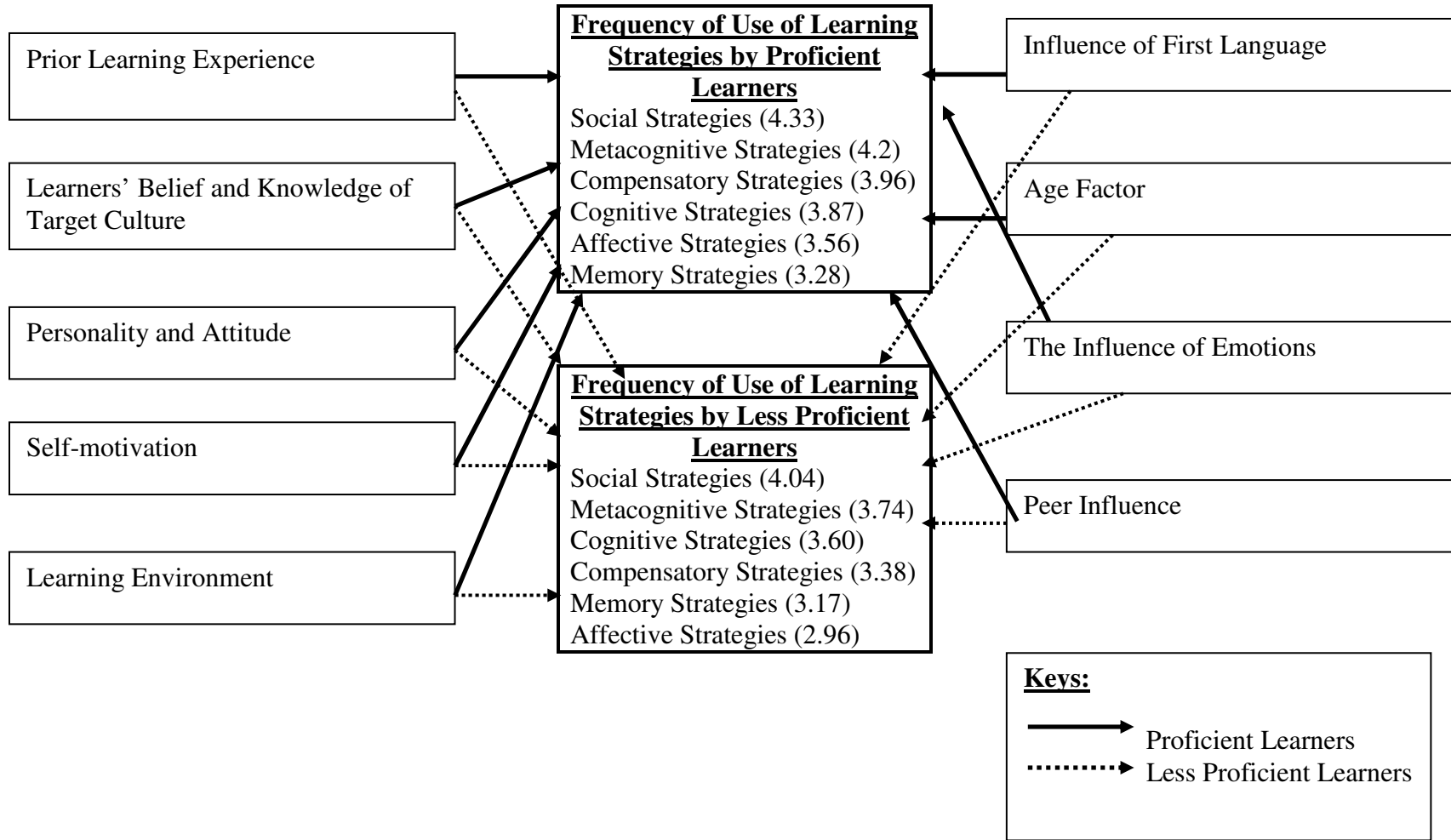


Figure 5.1 (a) shows factors that influenced both proficient and less proficient learners in the selection of their strategies. Firstly, the researcher will summarise the frequency of use of learning strategies by both groups. This is followed by variables that contributed to their choice of learning strategies.

The findings revealed that the proficient learners of EFL in this study employed social strategies as the most frequent pattern of learning strategy. Social strategies were used to enhance the language skills by asking questions, cooperating with other students and being aware of their feelings, thoughts and culture. Due to their high proficiency, the learners found social strategies were easy to use. They were not afraid of socialising or communicating with others as they believed that practising English would enhance their language skills. In addition, the proficient learners hoped to practise English in a natural way. Thus, social strategies were chosen as the most frequently used method. Similarly, social strategies were also employed as the most frequently used learning strategies by the less proficient learners, despite their low proficiency to complete the language tasks.

Metacognitive strategies were the second most frequently used learning strategies by the proficient learners. The learners were able to plan, organise and evaluate their English language tasks. Due to their high proficiency in the language, the learners were able to plan for a language task, and to self-correct

their mistakes. Similarly, metacognitive strategies were also employed by the less proficient students. The less effective learners tried to organise and evaluate their English language skills although their proficiency level was poor.

Although the proficient learners had strong language skills, compensation strategies were employed to overcome limitations in speaking and writing. Furthermore, the learners used linguistic and non-linguistic clues to guess the meaning of unfamiliar phrases or words in English. On the contrary, the unsuccessful learners employed more cognitive than compensatory strategies, because they used a lot of repetitions and translation methods in learning English.

Memory strategies were not as popular as social strategies for the proficient learners, because they felt that learning by memorising would hinder them from acquiring language skills. In other words, rote learning would not help them to develop critical thinking in analysing or solving a language task. Unlike the proficient learners, memory strategies were still used by the weaker learners, because they found it easier to remember words or phrases than to practise the language in a natural way. Since the less effective learners relied more on memory strategies, compensatory strategies were not frequently used. The learners sometimes used these compensatory strategies if the context was not so difficult.

Affective strategies were utilised by the proficient learners to make positive statements and control their emotions through progressive relaxation, or deep breathing to lower the level of anxiety. However, the less proficient learners were unable to control their language anxiety while acquiring or learning the language. Thus, affective strategies were the least frequently used by the less proficient learners. The level of self-motivation of each less proficient learner was inconsistent. They were unable to motivate themselves or think positively to enhance their English language skills. Furthermore, the less proficient learners did not possess a strong determination to excel in their daily language tasks. In short, the level of interest of these less proficient learners was low, and this lack of interest might affect the motivation of other students in the classrooms.

The selection of learning strategies by the proficient and less proficient students of EFL was mainly influenced by previous learning experiences, beliefs, knowledge of a target culture, and positive attitude and high level of motivation. Such experience had a major influence on the choice of learning strategies, because both groups (proficient and less proficient) were introduced or exposed to some learning strategies like using flashcards, practising or memorising some grammatical rules, repeating phrases or words, drilling method, analysing and reasoning language tasks, and taking notes.

Learning in a private language centre or institution and in schools could have enhanced the learning experience of the proficient students. Furthermore, parents could have played a role in influencing the learners, because English is an international language widely used throughout the world. Overseas studies also contributed to their learning experience, because the “immersion” experience might have provided the learners with an authentic environment to practise and utilise the language completely.

Beliefs and knowledge of a target culture played an important role in influencing the selection of learning strategies by the two groups. The proficient and less capable learners strongly believed that learning the culture of English speakers was the only way to further develop their language skills. The research also found that the learners gained their English knowledge from watching English movies or television programmes. By watching English movies or television programmes, the learners were able to remember or store the information for a longer period. The less proficient students believed that social strategies could help them to practise the language. However, starting a conversation with others in English was not the preferred choice of the learners, because it would not help them much. Besides, the learning environment around them did not provide much opportunity.

Having a positive attitude and a high level of motivation seemed to have encouraged the competent learners to further enhance their language skills. These two factors were closely linked, because a positive learner would always be highly motivated to find ways of developing his language skills. Setting such goals and objectives would also indirectly increase the level of motivation to excel further. Unlike the proficient learners, the less proficient ones possessed low motivational level and thus, they could not sustain their interest in learning English. Furthermore, the learners did not possess the inner drive to do their best because they lacked interest in the language.

Learning environment, the influence of first language, age factor, the effect of emotions, and peer influence also played a part in the choice of learning strategies. A positive learning environment encouraged the proficient learners to employ appropriate learning strategies like asking questions for clarification and verification. Besides a conducive environment, the student's first language also went a long way in influencing him in analysing the contrasting ways of the English language and his mother tongue. Comparisons were made between the two languages in terms of sounds, words and syntax. These proficient learners would translate certain difficult words or phrases into English from their mother tongue. The less proficient learners often relied on translation to get an idea of what certain English words and phrases meant. Therefore, first language was frequently used by the less proficient learners to replace compensatory strategies.

The age factor also figures prominently in the study of English among the foreign students. Depending on their age, learners would either use flashcards or write English reports. Flashcards are commonly used by younger children, while adults would prefer to write their reports in English. Emotion came into play when the proficient learners were not afraid of communicating with others. The less capable ones, however, were unable to control their language anxiety, because their level of confidence is quite low.

Peer influence encouraged the proficient learners to seek more practice opportunities. They were keen to participate in classroom activities, especially during group discussion. The less proficient ones also relied on their peers to pick up language skills or to grasp certain unfamiliar phrases or words in English.

In summary, the two groups of learners employed both direct and indirect learning strategies. But this will depend on the flexibility of the learners. The proficient participants appeared to be more flexible in the choice of strategies, while the less proficient students did not seem to be comfortable with the various learning methods. The following section discusses the implication of the study.

5.2: Implications of the Study

The study highlighted three aspects with their implications: theoretical, methodological and pedagogical. As such, it is hoped that language learners, teachers and curriculum designers will gain an understanding from the findings of the study.

5.2.1: Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, good language learners often employ more strategies than the less effective ones. Both Shmais (2003) and Wu (2008) agreed that highly proficient EFL students employed language learning strategies more frequently than the less efficient ones. The high achievers are able to articulate and explain their methods better than the low achievers.

Using appropriate learning strategies may help the students acquire a good command of a second language. Learners who choose appropriate strategies are often self-reliant. Through self-monitoring and self-evaluation, the learners plan, co-ordinate and carry out their English tasks independently. However, Sert (2006) argues despite sufficient opportunities for classroom activities, most of the learner-oriented activities are not effectively used. These theoretical implications often give rise to a query on the methodological implications — to what extent do these learners, consciously or unconsciously, become aware of the learning strategies?

5.2.2: Methodological Implications

Both proficient and less proficient learners used learning strategies to acquire language skills. Nevertheless, the question that arises is, to what extent are they aware that they are using learning strategies? Sert (2006) argues that EFL students in a Turkish university were unable to identify the goals or skills they wanted to achieve or master since they were unable to self-evaluate their own ability.

However, learning strategies can be implemented if the students share or talk about their learning experience or demonstrate how they learn the target language (English). At times, the participants were aware of the strategies, for example, seeking opportunities to practise using English, but at other times, they were unsure whether similar strategies they employed in their first language could be applied to pick up English language skills. Therefore, it is rather challenging for language instructors to gauge whether students who resort to using strategies are doing it consciously or implicitly. This challenge has given rise to pedagogical implications, which are discussed in the following section.

5.2.3: Pedagogical Implications

Understanding the learning strategies of both proficient and less proficient learners will enable language instructors and curriculum designers to further improve their work. The ability of proficient learners to understand strategies indicated that these methods can be taught. However, teachers need to be aware that they are not dealing with a level playing field because all learners come equipped with different levels of aptitude. This means that a learning strategy may work for one learner, but not necessarily so for the other.

Thus, both teachers and curriculum designers need to tailor their tasks and activities to suit the intellectual requirements of the students. Authentic English language materials such as songs, television episodes, emails, online games, blogs and text messages can be integrated into pedagogical activities to provide students with more opportunities to acquire the language skills. Lin and Qin (2006) recommended that teachers should also promote more self-reliant learning and, at the same time, encourage students to discover their own learning strategy. Thus, English language materials can be used to nurture an independent language learner. The following section suggests recommendations for future research.

5.3: Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is needed to construct flexible and effective learning strategies that could encourage English language learners to be more independent in their studies. The following sub-segments explain two recommendations.

5.3.1: Implementing Different Types of Instruction

Implementing different types of instruction in learning strategies and investigating the possibility of transferring these methods from classroom settings to outside the classroom would be beneficial to students. Such research is needed because EFL learners need to know which strategies can be used inside and outside the classroom.

5.3.2: Strategy Training for EFL students

Future research should focus more on methods that integrate language training strategy into language instruction. This training strategy should examine the effectiveness of successful strategies, which do not necessarily come from “good” language learners. Sometimes “less effective or weak” learners may have adopted effective learning strategies in certain areas. Future research should also focus on general academic skills courses. These courses are particularly needed to help students cope with the difficulties found in English lessons. Lastly, in order to create awareness on the use of learning strategies, the effectiveness of mini

strategy workshops should be explored. These workshops can help learners evaluate or monitor their learning process via various consciousness-raising and strategy-assessment activities.

5.3.3: Peer Tutoring Sessions

Peer tutoring sessions are essential for both proficient and less proficient learners because they encourage English language learners to organise regular English study groups. Furthermore, students who have completed an English language course can be invited to these sessions to motivate other learners. Hence, less capable students can benefit from the language skills of more proficient learners. At the same time, the proficient learners may also gain a better insight into certain language difficulties and provide some suggestions on how to tackle the problems independently.

5.3.4: Videotaped Learning Testimonials

In order to increase the level of motivation among the language learners, videotaping students' testimonials would be another recommended approach. These videotaped testimonials would show other students how to take charge of their own progress while learning the language. The learners can thus gain a better insight into the experiences of other motivated learners.

5.3.5: Strategies-Based Instruction (SBI)

SBI is a learner-oriented approach to teaching that includes both implicit and explicit integration of strategies into the curriculum content. Through SBI, students can independently experience learning strategies, and also have the opportunities to share their chosen strategies with other students. In addition, English teachers can suggest language-specific strategies and reinforce the strategies while presenting the course. The teachers can describe the concepts and give examples of potentially beneficial strategies, elicit examples from students, organise group discussions about strategies, and finally encourage students to experiment with various methods. In addition, the teachers are encouraged to provide constructive feedback on the students' performance in class.

5.4: Conclusion

In conclusion, the research has two segments that need to be studied. First, there is a need to explore the frequent use of learning strategies between proficient and less proficient learners. Second, attempts must be made to study factors influencing their choice of learning strategies. Quantitative methodology should be applied when identifying the frequent use of learning strategies. Qualitative methodology can be employed to study the variables that influenced the choice of strategies. With the rapid developments in teaching and learning, it is hoped that this study will help future researchers in coming up with guidelines that will promote self-reliant learners.