

# Exploring English Language Learners' Needs and Learning Strategies in the University Setting

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## **Abstract**

Understanding the needs of English language learners (ELLs) is vital to provide appropriate instruction and services and many studies have primarily focused on K-12 levels. The author explored ELLs' needs and language learning strategies at the postsecondary level in a university setting by using survey and individual interviews. Findings indicate that ELLs do face some particular challenges from language as well as culture in a university setting. Cooperative learning is an effective pedagogical strategy used in classrooms, and compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies and social strategies are most often used strategies for ELLs.

## **Introduction**

The United States has been a popular place for international students to pursue college education. According to the 2014 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased by eight percent to a record high of 886,052 students in the 2013/14 academic year. In 2013/14, there were 66,408 more international students enrolled in U.S. higher education compared to the previous year. It confirmed that the United States remains the destination of choice for higher education. However, many international students have come to the United States from countries where very little or no English is spoken. Some of them enrolled in the intensive English program (IEP) in American universities, but many of them just study in mainstream university classrooms without the regular academic English learning experience in America. Because of the differences between the home country environment and the foreign country environment, English language learners are unable to handle the change as well as difficulties effectively and efficiently (Ayano, 2006).

Among these changes or difficulties, one of the significant issues is learning a new language. Language differences can be barriers to communication, which may affect self-confidence, community and academic involvement. With this in mind, understanding the needs and learning strategies of adult English language learners in university settings is important to provide appropriate instruction and services.

## Literature Review

Research about the challenges ELLs have experienced indicates that many students are not mentally and culturally prepared for the new environment and they are unaware of many adjustment problems they must overcome in the totally different learning settings (Li, Baker, & Marshall, 2002). Fatima (2001) and Galloway and Jenkins (2005) identified that international students experienced significant difficulties when they first arrived and adjusted to a new academic and social environment, such as educational system differences, academic requirements, cultural differences, language challenges, food incompatibilities, time management, and social integration. Kaur (2006) further stated the differences in academic environment include learning styles, class discussion and participation, and student-teacher relationship, etc. Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) revealed that Asian students at a Canadian university had problems such as understanding lectures, taking notes, and answering questions, etc. Because of limited language proficiency students are not confident when express their opinions and communicate with people from other cultures. This perception affects their communication in class when discussing with others or asking and answering questions (Holmes, 2004). Besides language influences, Swagler and Ellis (2003) also indicated that Asian students found it difficult to socialize with their American counterparts due to differences in cultural values.

English language ability and its influences on ELLs' adjustment processes and integration is an important concern for ELLs (Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003). Mastering a foreign language requires learners to overcome many difficulties such as a good command of phonological, syntactic, and semantic aspects of language. Therefore, improving English language learners' learning is a paramount concern for language instructors and researchers.

Language learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their learning. Oxford (1990) explained, "Strategies are especially important for language learning, because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence." (p. 7). Strategy training can improve learners' performance and enhance their self-efficacy (Bouffard-Bouchard, T., Parent, S., & Larivee, S., 1991). Schunk (1995) also maintained that teaching strategies raise students' self-efficacy because strategies help them to process academic materials.

Oxford (1990) categorized language learning strategies into direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include (1) memory strategies, which help learners store and retrieve new information, such as grouping, creating mental linkages, applying images and sound, reviewing, and employing action, (2) Cognitive strategies, assist learners to understand and produce new language, such as reasoning, practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and summarizing, (3) Compensation strategies, let

learners use the language and compensate for limited knowledge, such as guessing meanings from context or using synonyms and gestures to convey meanings when the learners do not know the precise expression. Indirect strategies include (1) metacognitive strategies, which help learners to master their own cognition, such as planning for language tasks, self-evaluating and monitoring one's errors, (2) affective strategies, which help learners to manage their own emotions, motivation, and attitudes, such as anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, (3) Social strategies, which help learners learn the language through interactions with others, such as asking questions and cooperating with native speakers of the language. Various factors may influence students' choice of language learning strategies. Oxford (1994) and Oxford and Ehrman (1995) identified factors that influenced the choice of language learning strategies such as gender, age, cultural background, nation, motivation, attitudes and beliefs, type of task, learning style and teacher perceptions. Among these factors, nation is one of the factors that has been found to affect students' strategy use. Politzer (1983) identified that Hispanics and Asians had differences in the types of language learning strategies they used. Hispanics used more social strategies while Asians used more rote memorization. Similar findings also claimed that Oriental students preferred strategies involving rote memorization and language rules rather than communicative strategies (Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Tyacke & Mendelsohn, 1986).

There has been research exploring effective ways to help ELLs to speak, read and comprehend English from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade (Slavin & Yampolsky, 1992). Many reports and acts also have addressed the needs of bilingual learners from elementary to high school in the U.S., such as the Bilingual Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act. However, there have only been a few studies that focus on ELLs at the postsecondary level or graduate level (Bifuh-Ambe, 2011). The challenges for both the secondary and post-secondary learners may be similar. However, post-secondary English learners face unique challenges to obtaining their educational goals. These learners have unique social, cultural, economic, and academic experiences. As Galbraith (2004) says that these learners are varied in their physical, social, psychological, moral, and learning developmental directions. There are no rich academic curricula or special assistance available for ELLs in the university classrooms. Cho and Reich (2008) state "ELLs should have full access to appropriate curricula taught by qualified teachers using appropriate instructional resources and methods that match students' current language level. However, not many universities can afford such support (e.g., bilingual instructional materials, time, and specific guidelines)".

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study is to examine needs and language learning strategies identified by ELLs in a university setting. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the real situations and needs of ELLs at a university? Is there any

- challenge for ELLs, and if yes, how do these challenges impact ELLs?
2. What are the language learning strategies identified by ELLs? Is there any significant difference concerning strategy use between ELLs from Asian countries and non-Asian countries?
  3. What pedagogical practices support learning for ELLs?

The mixed method was used in this study. Data were collected from two sources: (1) survey (2) transcriptions of audio-taped interviews with each students.

### *Study Participants*

The participants were 77 students from ESL program in a southeastern university in America. Six students didn't finish the survey. The valid number of participants is 71. 29 (41%) e males and 42 (59%) females. Most of the total group 72% (51) were undergraduate students, while 20% (14) were graduate students and only 8% (6) just finished high school. Participants were from countries that speak a language other than English. Thirty percent (21) were from Brazil, while another 24% (17) were from Saudi Arabia. Approximately 18% (13) were from South Korea and 14% (10) were from China, and the rest (14%) were students from Japan, Turkey, Bangladash, Mali and Iran.

The interviews were carried out among four graduate students. Three of them are females and one male. Three participants are from China and one participant from Egypt.

### *Study Instruments*

The Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was used to identify the strategy use of ELLs. The SILL was created by Rebecca Oxford in the year 1990 to identify the variety and frequency of use of language learning strategies. The questionnaire contains 50 items (ESL/EFL version) with six categories of strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The questionnaire is self-scoring and students rate themselves on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 ("never or almost never true of me") to 5 ("always or almost always true of me").

The individual interviews were used for this study to further explore and describe what was occurring among the students whose native language is not English. Each interview lasted about one hour. Quotation sources are from audiotaped interviews. The transcriptions of 4 interviews were then further analyzed using the qualitative analysis software package, Atlasti, with a specific focus on the research questions of present study.

## Results

### *Results of Survey*

Table 1 presents the results of the SILL survey, which measured participants' learning strategy use. As shown in Table 1, the mean for the overall strategy use is 3.60. It indicates that participants often use language learning strategies in their learning process. Among the different strategies, the compensation strategies have the highest mean (3.81), followed by metacognitive strategies (3.79), social strategies (3.78), cognitive strategies (3.64), memory strategies (3.31) and affective strategies (3.24). It shows that compensation strategies (i.e. guessing meanings, using gestures), metacognitive strategies (i.e. planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one's progress, and monitoring error) and social strategies (i.e. asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, and becoming culturally aware) are the most often used strategies, while affective strategy is the least often used strategy. The results are consistent with the Pape and Wang (2003) study. Pape and Wang (2003) analyzed the verbal protocol data and strategy questionnaire data among 40 sixth- and 40 seventh-grade students. More than 80% of the participants reported important academic behaviors such as seeking information, seeking social assistance, goal setting and planning, and organizing and transforming.

Table 1

Scores on SILL		
Strategy	M	SD
Memory	3.31	0.77
Cognitive	3.64	0.53
Compensation	3.81	0.66
Metacognitive	3.79	0.67
Affective	3.24	0.71
Social	3.78	0.80
Overall	3.60	0.54

In order to investigate whether Asian students used different strategies from non-Asian students, an independent sample t-test was used. The t-test showed that memory strategy use was linked to nation ( $t=-2.35$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Asians ( $M=3.44$ ) used more memory strategies than non-Asians ( $M=2.99$ ). Asians were also significantly different from non-Asians regarding affective strategy use ( $t=-2.43$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Asian students ( $M=3.37$ ) scored higher on affective strategy use than non-Asian students ( $M=2.94$ ). The finding is somewhat consistent with previous researches (Politzer, 1983; Politzer & McGroarty,

1985; Tyacke & Mendelsohn, 1986). Asians preferred rote memorization rather than communicative strategies. A reason for this may be due to their previous school experience as dictated by their cultures (Swagler & Ellis, 2003).

### *Results of Individual Interviews*

It is known that to be in the academic program a passing TOEFL score is required for international students. However, the fact of passing the TOEFL does not ensure equitable access to academic material, and just like one participant said, "Sometimes students only focus on passing exam. There is some difference between real environment and the TOFEL test. We have special skills to get higher scores on the test but we need some real learning experiences or language environments."

### *Language Challenges*

Newman, et al. (2012) identified that language barriers are the main barriers for newcomers to the states. The participants reported language challenges. Without conscious attention by the instructor to ways that language is used and received, many ELLs struggle to attain academic standing to the level of their native English speaking peers. Here are some examples:

*P2: "Maybe I need to improve pronunciation. At the beginning, I can't understand professor well. Maybe she give instruction, and my understanding is another way. I made some mistakes."*

*P3: "At first when I came to America when I communicated with others, American people, I just couldn't understand what they say. I think they speak so fast and use phrases we don't use among Chinese students."*

*P4: "Sometimes native speakers talk very fast. They suppose I understand. They don't try to make their voice slow. I feel shy to ask them 'excuse me, I don't understand.' I have to pretend I understand them."*

In terms of specific language skills, participants agreed that listening and speaking are two difficult tasks/skills for them to master.

*P4: "The challenge is my listening. My class based on discussion, so I have to listen very well, and then I answer question from teacher and classmates. I have to make sure what I perceived is what the people say exactly. It takes me some time to get use to them...I have to focus on what they are saying, if I missed one word, I probably lost the sentence."*

*P4: "Another problem is daily conversation. When I get a phone call from somebody like clinic or school of my kids, and I talk to somebody and at the end of call he said I don't understand what you are saying. I feel not happy. This means I have to improve my skills and talk."*

Because of limited language proficiency, different culture, and academic backgrounds, ELLs have to deal with a lot of challenges in their academic learning classroom. For example:

P1: *"The educational system is different from my country. I have limited information about this country, such as culture, people, traditions, customs. It takes time to learn. I learn slowly. I can't understand course content at the beginning."*

P2: *"The teaching styles are new for me. I am shy and don't ask professors questions directly."*

P3: *"The courses I took are graduate courses. Teachers assumed that they don't need to explain some terms, or concepts. But I can't understand what professors said in class. For some terms I know the Chinese name, but I don't know the English name."*

### *Effective Pedagogical Practices*

Participants have reported difficulties or challenges come from language barriers. One of the ways to deal with this issue is to communicate more with native speakers. It is suggested that direct contact between native and non-native English speakers promote language ability. One participant stated, *"From the daily contact, I have more contact with my professor and friends and we know more about each other through emails, through daily conversation, and how they say things, you know."*

Concerning communications, most participants identified the effectiveness of group work activities. Participants often state, *"I did group project with American students. And through this experience I know their learning styles and...and how they study in America."* *"I like group discussion in class. There are a lot of opportunities to discuss with other students or teachers. We can do some project together in the class. Interactions between teacher and students are very important for students to improve speaking skills."* Group work activities could provide students more opportunities to socialize and communicate with peers. It also may help to reduce the anxiety produced in the language classroom. Besides group work activities, another effective pedagogical practice reported is providing exemplary work. A participant noted, *"My professor is helpful since he will provide some simple examples that is similar to our projects and our questions that I can use the same method to solve my problem but the procedure may not be exactly the same but it's helpful for me to be familiar with the material that I should learn."* Assignment and test or quizzes also reported as effective methods for language learners to make progress, for example, *"We have assignments and tests here (in the U.S.), and maybe three or four tests in each semester. This is good in American classrooms, because students can improve through tests."*

### **Discussion**

ELLs have encountered challenges from language and culture. Limited English language proficiency impacts students' participation in academic activities and adaptation in new cultures. The resulting obstacles to interaction result in "experiences

of cultural disorientation” (Newman, et al., 2012, p. 2).

In the process of overcoming these challenges, students have benefited from teachers and classmates’ support and encouragement. Some pedagogical practices or strategies provided by instructors are effective to help ELLs to achieve academic goals. Group activities encourage classroom involvement and cooperation. Cooperative learning provides language learners practice opportunities and comprehensible input in developmentally appropriate ways and in a supportive and motivating environment (Ellis, 1994). An active use of strategies facilitates learners in control of developing language skills, increasing confidence and motivation in the learning process (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Strategy instructions enhance learners’ independent learning and autonomous learning. Strategy training provides a way of helping learners to take responsibility for their own learning (Ellis, 1997). The more strategies a learner uses, the more proficient they will more likely be. Successful learners may use different strategies at different stages of their development (Ellis, 1997). It is suggested teachers can provide students with different kinds of strategies so that students can find strategies that best work for their learning styles and consequently promote their language proficiency and actual performance.

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