

# **Investigating Iraqi EFL Students' Use of Social Learning Strategies**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Learning strategies are actions taken by the learner to assist in learning more effectively, i.e., it may represent planning, competition, conscious manipulation, and movement toward a goal. Social strategies have a great importance in EFL learning since they increase the language learner opportunity to use the language for communication with activities such as: going to movies, reading books or talking to those who speak English very well, etc.

This study aims at investigating Iraqi EFL students' use of social learning strategies. To achieve the aim of the study, the researchers have adopted a questionnaire that includes 30 items with the five point scale (always, usually, sometimes, rarely, never). The population of the study is fourth-year students at the Department of English/ College of Education for Women. The researchers applied the questionnaire on 80 students after modifying and changing certain items. In order to ensure the face validity, the questionnaire was exposed to a jury of experts in language and linguistics who agreed upon its validity and suitability. Twenty students were randomly chosen for the pilot study which revealed that the time needed to complete the questionnaire items was 45 minutes. As for the clarity of the items, it was noticed that most of the items were clear and the students found no difficulty in answering the questionnaire items. As for reliability, the items were divided into two halves (odd and even). Using the Pearson correlation formula, it is found out that the questionnaire reliability is 0.754. After applying the Spearman Brown formula, it was found out the questionnaire reliability is 0.859. This shows that the questionnaire is quite reliable and acceptable.

Using the Fisher's formula to manipulate the data statistically and establish the weighted mean for each item, it is proved that the participants use all the types of social strategies but with different weights. Some items of all the strategies (Asking questions, Cooperating with others, Empathizing with others, Seeking opportunities) are proved to be weak or

unused by some of the students, such as items (8, 12, 17, 18, 19, 23, 26, 27, 28 and 29). At the end, conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for further studies are put forward.

### **Section One: Introduction**

#### **1.1 The Problem and Significance of the Study**

Learning strategies are intentional behaviours or thoughts used by learners during their learning so as to help them understand, learn or remember new language information (Richards and Platt, 1992:209). Oxford (1990) continues to expand the definition of learning strategies as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, self-directed, effective and transferable to new situations (What are Learning Strategies, 2012:Int.).

Language learning strategies remain an active area of research in which Oxford highlights the appropriate use of learning strategies can result in increased second language proficiency which is supported by Nunan who demonstrates that tasks and activities that engage learners to reflect on their own learning and develop their skills in self-checking, monitoring, and evaluation and to become strategic learners (Richards and Renandya, 2002:122).

Social strategies plays an important role in EFL learning in which it can help learners use the language as a means of communication by affording them opportunities to be exposed to and practice their knowledge in the target language, i.e., to enhance chances to practice English (Phothongsunan,2006:31). Hence, language is used in communication and communication occurs between people, students will be more concerned with how to learn rather than with what to learn, with the communicative dimensions of language learning rather than with the grammar of language, so that students will be more eager to seek opportunities to use English beyond classroom (Richards and Renandya, 2002:122).

Examples of social strategies are asking questions for clarification or confirmation, asking for help, learning about social or cultural norms outside class...etc (Carter and Nunan, 2001: 169). Cooperating with others and empathizing with others are other examples of social strategies. Learners can apply the strategy of cooperating with others by doing something together in the language they are learning (Samida, 2012:Int.). Empathy is very important in communication, i.e., to develop cultural understanding and become aware of thoughts and feelings of others, to put oneself in someone else situation (ibid.).

Social learning can be influenced by the observation of or interaction with another individual (Rendell et.al, 2011:68). For this, the possibility of

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using such strategies may represent the basic guidelines or hints for helping unsuccessful learners to develop their own effective learning strategies (Phothongsunan, 2006:32).

There has been a shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the past two decades to focus on the learners and learning rather than merely on teachers and teaching (Lip, 2009: Int.). Learning can be seen by Gattegna (1972:89 as cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2003:24) not as the means of accumulating knowledge only but as the means of becoming a more proficient learner in whatever is engaged in. For this, learners should use a combination of different strategies in their own independent learning (Decarrico, 2001:290). One of the aims of learning English is to communicate with others. However, in recent years, research papers and pilot studies highlighted that English foreign language learners focus on their studies to attain their academic performance (linguistic competence) and disregard the use of language as a means of communication (linguistic performance). Many researchers highlighted the importance of the use of social strategies in helping learners to be exposed to and practice foreign language.

Therefore, in this study, the researchers are trying to investigate the usage of social learning strategies used by EFL college students. The present study has depended on Phothongsunans' categories (2006:37) which include the four main social strategies: asking questions, cooperating with others, empathizing with others, and seeking opportunities.

### **1.2 The Aim of the Study**

The present study aims at determining social learning strategies most frequently used by fourth-year college students according to their frequencies.

### **1.3 Limits of the Study**

This study is limited to fourth year college female students at the department of English/ college of Education for women / Baghdad University during the academic year 2012-2013.

### **1.4 Definitions of the Key Terms**

- Wenden and Rubin (1987 as cited in Tseng, 2005: 321) define **learning strategies** as “any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information”.
- Also, **learning strategies** are the thoughts and actions that individuals use to accomplish a learning goal (Chamot, 2004, 13).

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- Richards and Schimdt (2002: 301) define **learning strategies** as "the ways in which learners attempt to work and the meanings and uses of words, grammatical rules, and other aspects of the language they are learning".
- **Social Strategies** is defined as "actions learners take to interact with users of the language" (Richards and Renandya ,2002:122).
- Also, **Social Strategies** can be defined as"learning by interacting with others, such as working with follow students or asking teacher's help"(Cook, 2001:129).
- The practical definition of **social learning strategies** is an action used by students to enhance their own learning, such as seeking out opportunities to use the target language with those who speaks English well or working with peers in a classroom setting.

### Section Two: Procedures

#### 2.1 Population and Sample

The population of the present study is fourth-year students from the department of English/ college of education for women, during the academic year (2012-2013). There were 100 students distributed alphabetically into four sections. The sample has been chosen randomly from the population mentioned above. The total number of the sample was 80 students.

#### 2.2 Main Instrument

The questionnaire is the most appropriate tool to achieve the aim of the study. According to Henderson (1978: 60 as cited in Al-Garaghooly,2004:20), the use of the questionnaire is usually recommended by educators and psychologists especially in the area of research. The researchers have adopted a questionnaire from Phothongsunan (2006:38-40) and applied it on 80 students on 23/12/2012 after modifying and changing certain items as recommended by the jury of experts. Moreover, these items were arranged and grouped together according to the following categories which are asking questions, cooperating with others, empathizing with others and seeking opportunities.

#### 2.3 Description of the questionnaire

The questionnaire includes 30 items which covers different social strategies which are asking questions, cooperating with others, empathizing with others and seeking opportunities. The five point scale (always, usually, sometimes, rarely, never) is used. The frequencies for each item are calculated by assigning 1 point to the fifth (lowest) level 'never', 2 points for the fourth level 'rarely', 3 points for the third level 'sometimes', 4

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points for the second level 'usually', and finally 5 points for the first (highest) level 'always'(see Appendix 1).

### 2.4 Pilot administration of the questionnaire

Twenty students are chosen randomly for the pilot study. After applying the pilot study, it is revealed that the time needed to complete the questionnaire items was 45 minutes. As for the clarity of the items, it was noticed that most of the items were clear and the students found no difficulty in answering the questionnaire items.

### 2.5 Questionnaire Validity

In order to ensure the face validity, the questionnaire was exposed to a jury of experts<sup>1</sup> in language teaching and linguistics who agreed upon its validity and suitability.

### 2.6 Questionnaire Reliability

In order to find out the questionnaire reliability, the items were divided into two halves (odd and even). Using the Pearson correlation formula, it is found out that the questionnaire reliability is 0.754. After applying the Spearman Brown formula, it was found out the questionnaire reliability is 0.859. This shows that the questionnaire is quite reliable and acceptable.

### 2.7 Statistical manipulation

The average weighted means score of the questionnaire items is 3. Using the Fisher's formula to establish the mean score for each item, the item which obtains a weighted mean score of more than 3 is considered a strong item and the item which scores less than 3 is considered as a weak one.

### 2.8 Statistical Tools

The main statistical tools of the present study are:

#### 1. Pearson's Formula

$$R_{xy} = \frac{n(\epsilon xy) - (\epsilon x)(\epsilon y)}{\sqrt{(n(\epsilon x^2) - (\epsilon x)^2)(n(\epsilon y^2) - (\epsilon y)^2)}}$$

<sup>1</sup>the jury members are:

1. Assistant Prof. Dr. Duha Attallah Hassan (College of Basic Education, Al-Mustansiriyah University).
2. Prof. Shatha Al-Saadi (College of Education for Women, Baghdad University)
3. Instructor Zaineb Elawi (College of Basic Education, Al-Mustansiriyah University)
4. Instructor Fatima Khudair (College of Education for Women, Baghdad University)

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Where:  $\varepsilon xy = \text{sum of the } xy,$

$\varepsilon x = \text{the sum of the students answers on the odd items,}$

$\varepsilon y = \text{the sum of the students answers on the even items,}$  N= number of students,

X= students answers at the odd items, Y= students answers at the even items

(Mousavi, 2012:174).

### 2. Spearman Brown's Formula

$$R = \frac{2 \times R_{xy}}{1 + R_{xy}}$$

(Ibid, 680).

### 3. Fisher's Formula

*Weighted mean score of an item*

$$= \frac{F_1 \times 5 + F_2 \times 4 + F_3 \times 3 + F_2 \times 2 + F_1 \times 1}{\text{Total Frequency}}$$

Where  $F_1 =$  frequency of the first level (always)

$F_2 =$  frequency of the second level (often)

Etc...

(Fisher, 1956:327).

## Section three

### Presentation of the Results

Table 1 reveals that the participants use social strategies but with different weights. However, Some items of all the strategies (Asking questions, Cooperating with others, Empathizing with others, Seeking opportunities) are proved to be weak or unused by some of the students, like items (8, 12, 17,18,19,23, 26, 27, 28 and 29).

**Table 1 The Weighted Mean Scores for the Items of Social Learning Strategies Questionnaire**

Item rank	Item no	Items	Weighted mean scores	category
1.	11	I have a regular language learning friend	4.78	Cooperating with others
2.	3	I try to watch English movies as often as I can	4.25	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
3.	5	I try to sense the feelings of other people when they write something to me in English	4.2	Empathizing with others

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4.	10	I try to sense the feelings of other people when speak English with them face to face	4.18	Empathizing with others
5.	6	I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English	3.95	Empathizing with others
6.	9	I read and try to understand English signs and directions	3.9	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
7.	21	I use the Internet to learn more about English, native English people and their culture	3.76	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
8.	2	I try to watch English programs on TV	3.73	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
9.	25	I try to speak with or ask my friends in English	3.56	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
10.	22	I try to speak with or ask my teachers using English	3.51	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
11.	4	I try to listen to English songs	3.48	Seeking opportunities
12.	14	I ask other people to check whether they have understood my meaning in English correctly	3.42	Asking questions
13.	1	If I do not understand something in English ask other persons to slow down or say it again	3.32	Asking questions
14.	20	I try to learn about the culture of native English speakers	3.31	Empathizing with others
15.	15	If I don't understand something after I read, I ask my teachers or friends to clarify	3.23	Asking questions
16.	24	I play English games with myself and with others	3.13	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
17.	30	I practice listening to English language tapes	3.13	Seeking opportunities

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18.	7	I read extra books or sources in English	3.08	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
19.	16	I ask for general help from my classmates	3.06	Asking questions
20.	13	I try to find opportunities to talk to and socialize with others	3	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
21.	8	I try to listen to English radio programs	2.91	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
22.	17	I register for English lessons extra from regular ones at school	2.9	Seeking opportunities
23.	18	I ask my teachers/or friends to correct me when I speak	2.86	Asking questions
24.	29	I attend free public talks and lectures in English	2.83	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
25.	19	I work with my classmates to practice, review or share information	2.75	Cooperating with others and Seeking opportunities
26.	26	I participate in university activities e.g attending social events related to English	2.75	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities
27.	28	I spend extra time practicing English in the language lab	2.56	Seeking opportunities
28.	23	I ask my teachers/or friends to correct me when I write	2.31	Asking questions
29.	12	I keep in touch in English with other students by writing or e-mailing them	2.26	Cooperating with others and Seeking opportunities
30.	27	I attend the theatre to see a play in English (if any)	1.91	Empathizing with others, and Seeking opportunities

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This means that there are students who tend to use certain strategies while other strategies seem to be less frequently used; below are **the top five strategies** used by the sample of the study:

### **3.1.1 Item no 11 which states “I have a regular language learning friend”**

This item has ranked first and gained 4.78. This shows that learners who highly depend on the use of regular language learning friends have this sense of cooperation with others. However, it is limited to accomplish an academic task or do an assignment. Moreover, language learning situations is only limited with the friends in the university area and not beyond this. There are no chances to meet or interact with native English speakers.

### **3.1.2 Item no 3 which states “I try to watch English movies as often as I can”**

This strategy has ranked second and gained 4.25. This shows that learners try to watch English movies for the purpose of empathizing with others and seeking opportunities to develop their language speaking skill. It is known that watching movies is one of the social learning strategies that provide an important input of English language. Because, as Phothongsunan ( 2006: 31) has stated “through watching programmes on TV or movies, learners are exposed to authentic communicative English, which can assist in improving their linguistic competence and performance”.

### **3.1.3 Item no 5 which states “I try to sense the feelings of other people when they write something to me in English”**

This strategy has ranked third and gained 4.2. Learners sense of others' feelings when they write to them in English, i.e., empathizing with others feelings. In doing so, this strategy helps them understand what is conveyed more deeply and clearly. Since communication in writing is limited, reading repeatedly the intended messages could bring them closer to the people with whom they communicate (ibid, p.44).

### **3.1.4 Item no 10 which states “I try to sense the feelings of other people when speak English with them face to face”**

This strategy has ranked fourth and gained 4.18. Learners have the sense of others' feelings when they speak face to face to them in English, i.e., empathizing with others feelings throughout communication. Wenden and Rubin (1987 as cited in Phothongsunan,2006: 45) stress the need for deliberate, conscious effort on the part of the learner to excel in learning a second language. In other words, this means paying a lot of attention and being mentally active. Being mentally active entails converting or acting

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upon what one has received or asked about, which may cause changes in one's mind.

### **3.1.5 Item no 6 which states “I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English”**

This strategy has ranked fifth and gained 3.95. Learners pay close attention to others' thoughts and feelings when they speak or interact to them in English, i.e., empathizing with others throughout communication. Although the interaction is with none native speakers (friends and teachers) learners pay a considerable importance to the use of such strategy because as the researchers think this strategy plays an important role to understand the message conveyed and thereby leads to successful communication.

Here are the **bottom five strategies** used by the sample of the study:

### **3.2.1 Item no 26 which states “I participate in university activities e.g attending social events related to English”**

This strategy has gained 2.75. The researchers think that learners rarely use such strategy because they don't have such a chance to participate in social events to use English language in university activities.

### **3.2.2 Item no 28 which states “I spend extra time practicing English in the language lab”**

This strategy has gained 2.56. EFL learners use English language inside their classes only; labs are not available so that no time is spent for extra practices to the English language. Moreover, if labs hours are available most of the practice is controlled by the teacher.

### **3.2.3 Item no 23 which states “I ask my teachers/or friends to correct me when I write”**

This strategy has gained 2.31. Students don't apply such a strategy because in writing compositions or essays writing, giving feedback is the responsibility of the teacher in traditional classes and students are not given chances or encouraged to be part of this process. Moreover, student are not used to consult their friends in the writing process and this may due to the teachers' belief that peer feedback may not leads to reasonable result in writing lessons.

### **3.2.4 Item no 12 which states “I keep in touch in English with other students by writing or e-mailing them”**

This strategy has gained 2.26. In chatting or e-mailing, students don't use the English language to keep in touch with others because they depend largely on the Arabic language (native language) than the English language.

**3.2.5 Item no 27 which states “I attend the theatre to see a play in English (if any)”**

This strategy has gained 1.91. This strategy is never used by EFL learners because such theatres which present English plays or dramas are not available.

**Section Four: Conclusion, Suggestions and Recommendation**

**4.1 Conclusion**

A. It is proved that certain strategies like:

1. I have a regular language learning friend;
2. I try to watch English movies as often as I can;
3. I try to sense the feelings of other people when they write something to me in English;
4. I try to sense the feelings of other people when speak English with them face to face; and finally
5. I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English.

Seemed to be the most widely used strategies. While those strategies which are less frequently used and which gained less than 3 are:

1. I participate in university activities e.g attending social events related to English;
2. I spend extra time practicing English in the language lab;
3. I ask my teachers/or friends to correct me when I write; and finally
4. I keep in touch in English with other students by writing or e-mailing them; and finally
5. I attend the theatre to see a play in English (if any).

B. Some items of all the strategies (Asking questions, Cooperating with others, Empathizing with others, Seeking opportunities) are proved to be weak or unused by some of the students, like items (8,12, 17,18,19,23, 26, 27, 28 and 29). The less frequent usage of such strategies is because EFL teachers do not highlight them as important strategies which develop both linguistic competence and performance of their students. In addition, language learning situations do not encourage learners to use such strategies. Moreover chances, if available, are rare. **4.2**

**Recommendations**

It is recommended to:

1. encourage students to use all types of social learning strategies;
2. raise students' awareness of the importance of applying these strategies to improve their learning; and finally

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3. motivate students to use certain strategies not only inside the classroom but also outside the classroom.

### 4.3 Suggestions for Further Research

In the light of the results obtained, the following suggestions are put forward:

1. Investigating the effect of social learning strategies on EFL college students.
2. Examining the relationship between the use of social learning strategies and gender.
3. Investigating the most useful social learning strategies used by EFL learners.
4. Investigating the social learning strategies used by successful learners and those of unsuccessful ones.

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### Appendix 1

#### The Questionnaire items

Items SLS		Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1.	If I do not understand something in English ask other persons to slow down or say it again					
2.	I try to watch English programs on TV					
3.	I try to watch English movies as often as I can					
4.	I try to listen to English songs					
5.	I try to sense the feelings of other people when they write something to me in English				+	
6.	I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English					
7.	I read extra books or sources in English					
8.	I try to listen to English radio programs					
9.	I read and try to understand English signs and directions					
10.	I try to sense the feelings of other people when speak English with them face to face					
11.	I have a regular language learning friend					
12.	I keep in touch in English with other students by writing or e-mailing them					
13.	I try to find opportunities to talk to and socialize with others					
14.	I ask other people to check whether they have understood my meaning in English correctly					
15.	If I don't understand something after I read, I ask my teachers or friends to clarify					
16.	I ask for general help from my classmates					
17.	I register for English					

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	lessons extra from regular ones at school					
18.	I ask my teachers/or friends to correct me when I speak					
19.	I work with my classmates to practice, review or share information					
20.	I try to learn about the culture of native English speakers					
21.	I use the Internet to learn more about English, native English people and their culture					
22.	I try to speak with or ask my teachers using English					
23.	I ask my teachers/or friends to correct me when I write					
24.	I play English games with myself and with others					
25.	I try to speak with or ask my friends in English					
26.	I participate in university activities e.g attending social events related to English					
27.	I attend the theatre to see a play in English (if any)					
28.	I spend extra time practicing English in the language lab					
29.	I attend free public talks and lectures in English					
30.	I practice listening to English language tapes					

## استقصاء استخدام الاستراتيجيات الاجتماعية من قبل

### الطالبات الدارسات للغة الانكليزية

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#### المستخلص

استراتيجيات التعلم هي افعال تؤخذ بنظر الاعتبار من قبل المتعلم من اجل التعلم الفعال، وتتضمن التخطيط ، المنافسة ، استخدام الذكاء من اجل تحقيق الهدف. استراتيجيات التعلم لها تاثير على تعلم اللغة الانكليزية حيث تؤكد على استخدام اللغة من اجل التواصل باستخدام الانشطة الاتية: مشاهدة الافلام ، قراءة الكتب او التحدث مع المتحدثين بشكل جيد للغة الانكليزية الخ.

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى التحقق من استخدام استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعي من قبل الطلبة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية. لتحقيق هدف الدراسة، اعتمدت الباحثتان استبيان يتكون من 30 فقرة مع مقياس مكون من خمس نقاط (دائماً ، عادة، في بعض الاحيان ، نادراً ما، ابداً). عينة الدراسة هي المرحلة الرابعة- كلية التربية للبنات / قسم اللغة الانكليزية. قامت الباحثتان بتطبيق الاستبيان على 80 طالبة بعد تعديل وتغيير بعض الفقرات. تم اختيار عشرون طالبة بشكل عشوائي من اجل الدراسة الاستطلاعية ، وبعد تطبيق الاستبيان اوضحت الدراسة بان وقت اجابة الاستبيان هو 45 دقيقة مع وضوح فقرات الاستبيان حيث لا يوجد صعوبة في الاجابة عليها. ومن اجل التأكد من صدق الاستبيان، تم عرضه على مجموعه من الخبراء الذين وافقوا على مصداقيته ومناسبته للتطبيق. ومن اجل التأكد من ثبات الاستبيان، تم تقسيم الفقرات الى مجموعتين (الفردية والزوجية). باستخدام معادلة بيرسن تبين بان ثبات الاستبيان هو 0.754 وباعادة تصحيحه باستخدام معادلة سبيرمان براون، تبين بان ثبات الاستبيان هو 0.859 هذا يبين بان الاستبيان ثابت ومقبول.

وباستخدام معادلة فشر لمعالجة البيانات احصائياً وتحديد المتوسط لكل فقرة. بعد تحليل الاستبيان ، تبين بان الطالبات يستخدمن معظم انواع الاستراتيجيات الاجتماعية لكن باوزان مختلفة. قد تبين بان الفقرات التابعة لكل الاستراتيجيات (طرح الأسئلة، التعاون مع الآخرين، التعاطف مع الآخرين، والباحثين عن فرص) فيها نقاط ضعف او غير مستخدمة من قبل بعض الطالبات وهي (8 ، 12 ، 17 ، 19 ، 18 ، 23 ، 26 ، 27 ، 28 و 29 ) . في نهاية البحث ، تم وضع الاستنتاجات والتوصيات والمقترحات لدراسة اخرى.