

## Nationality & Language Learning Strategies of ELT-Major University Students

### Abstract

Although there has been an increase in research articles in recent years dealing with language learning strategies, nationality is one of the neglected variables. This paper presents the results of an international study identifying the preferences of language learning strategies of English Language Teaching (ELT) majors. The subjects of the study are attending ELT departments of universities in three different countries: China, Hungary and Turkey. The paper also seeks to identify the most and the least used strategies by these groups in addition to investigating the relationship between nationality and language learning strategy preferences. According to the results of the SILL, the findings indicate that very little differences (although not at a significant level) in overall strategy use emerged among Chinese, Hungarian, and Turkish background ELT-major learners. Within strategy categories, however, significant differences did emerge, and in terms of individual strategy use, major difference also emerged, especially in the most preferred strategy groups.

### Introduction

In the last two decades, researchers and teachers have shown a great interest in determining what differs successful from less successful language learners. This has led to find the characteristics of successful language learners (Rubin, 1975), especially their use of modifiable L2 variables. One of these variables is the use of language learning strategies. Strategies are conscious steps or behaviors used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information (Rigney, 1978; Oxford, 1990). The conscious use of language learning strategies has been found to be one of the characteristics of good language learners (Rubin, 1975; Bialystok, 1981; Wenden, 1985; Cohen, 1987; O Malley and Chamot, 1990). Skehan (1989) considered language-learning strategies one of the most important factors accounting for individual differences in language learning.

Three countries included in the study were China, Hungary and Turkey. China is considered to be a very traditional country with a unique both educational and socio-political system. Hungary is an Eastern European country facing a tremendous change after 1990 and yet still struggling with the past experiences. And Finally Turkey which is again considered to be a very traditional country in the middle of both Asia and Europe. These three countries have both very similar features, such as a long history of rote memorization in their educational system, unconditioned obedience to authority, etc. Therefore, the study can be very useful to understand the use of learning strategies in these traditional countries better. The paper starts with a brief background on the use of language learning strategies followed by why this study is carried out. Then the instruments used in the study along with the data collection procedure is explained. Finally, the paper concludes with the possible implications of the study for further research.

## Background

Research suggests that more proficient language learners use more learning strategies and more types of strategies than less proficient language learners (Altan, 2003; Green & Oxford, 1995; Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Oxford, 1985; Rubin, 1975, 1981; Stern, 1983; Wharton, 2000) and are better able to choose strategies appropriate to the task (Vann & Abraham, 1990). The types of language learning strategies used by different learners vary according to many variables including motivation, gender, type of task, age, subject matter, level of L2, learning style, and cultural background (Oxford, 1989). Despite the fact that certain types of learners defined by cultural background are predisposed to use certain types of strategies, it is difficult to say that research findings have completely explored the effects of cultural background in determining strategy preferences. The main finding in Bedell's (1993) study cited in Oxford, et. al. (1995) was that different cultural groups use particular kinds of strategies at different levels of frequency. According to Politzer and McGroarty (1985), Asian students tend to prefer rote memorization strategies and rule-oriented strategies. Oxford (1994) found that Taiwanese students seem far more structured, analytic, memory-based, and metacognitively oriented than other groups. McGroarty (1987) cited in Oxford, et. al. (1995) found that Spanish learners use highly traditional strategies such as using a dictionary to learn words. Similarly, O Malley and Chamot (1990) found that students of Asian background prefer their own established rote learning strategies. Correspondingly, Huang & Van Naerssen (1987); Tyacke & Mendelsohn (1986) point out that Asian learners prefer strategies including rote memorization and a focus on the linguistic code. According to O'Malley et al. (1985) Asian learners also showed more reluctance than Hispanic learners to try new learning techniques. The use of strategies that are different from those used by other cultural groups led Politzer and Mc Groarty (1985) to conclude that many accepted "good" language-learning strategies may be based on ethnocentric assumptions, namely Western, about effective language learning.

## Aim of the study

This paper aims to provide some evidence of the language learning strategy use of English Language Teaching (ELT)-major learners from China, Hungary and Turkey, and to determine the effects of nationality in the choice of language learning strategies and the frequency of use for ELT-major learners who are going to be English teachers in future in these countries. This information has potential importance for raising educators' awareness of educational practices of specific cultural groups. This study is particularly useful for teachers who are planning to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) overseas. Equally this study can be useful for ESL educators in a heterogeneous classroom environment.

## Instrumentation & Data collection

The survey was distributed to 25 students in each context, providing a response rate of 84 percent. Twenty-one participants from each country, making a total of sixty-three were included in the study. Of these; 47 were female and 16 were male with a mean of (19,77) years of age. Participants were reminded that there are no right or wrong answers, in addition, they were told that the Inventory is designed to help students understand better how they learn a new language and to help them become better learners. All of the participants were native speakers of the nationality they belong. The mean of the study of English Language of the participants was around eight years. The participants were all ELT-majors attending either the first year or Preparation school of ELT departments from Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, China; University of Miskolc, Egyetemvaros, Hungary, and İnönü University, Malatya, Turkey.

The instrument used in the data collection was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), version 7.0 (ESL/EFL), which requires students to answer questions on their language learning strategy use on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "never or almost never true" to "always or almost always true." Version 7.0 of the SILL is a fifty-item Likert scale (1-5 range) self-report instrument that assesses the frequency with which the respondent uses a variety of different techniques for foreign language learning. SILL was developed by Oxford for the Army Research Institute and the Defense Language Institute. SILL covers six factors: remembering more effectively (9 items), using mental processes (14 items), compensating for missing knowledge (6 items), organizing and evaluating one's learning (9 items), managing one's emotions (6 items), and learning with others (6 items). In terms of mean scores, High use ranges from 3.5-5, Medium use 2.5-3.4, and Low use 1.0-2.4. Reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the Inventory is .96 based on a 1,200-person sample (Purdue University) and .95 based on a 483-person sample (DLI). Content validity is .95 based on independent raters. In this study, the internal consistency reliability of the SILL used was measured at .94 using Cronbach's alpha. SILL is the most widely used inventory for determining the language learning strategies all over the world by students of second and foreign languages in different settings including universities, schools, and government agencies. It is also the most consistent tool with learners' strategy use (Hsiao&Oxford, 2002).

The results of data analysis were completed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 8.0.

Table 1  
SILL Strategy Categories

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Part A= Remembering more effectively (Memory strategies, 9 items)
Part B= Using mental processes (Cognitive Strategies, 14 items)
Part C= Compensating for missing knowledge (Compensating strategies, 6 items)
Part D= Organizing and evaluating learning (Metacognitive strategies, 9 items)
Part E= Managing emotions (Affective strategies, 6 items)
Part F= Learning with others (Social strategies, 6 items)

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## Results

The analysis is divided into a number of sections. First, the overall mean for each group is reported, followed by category means for the groups, and then individual strategy means for each of the groups. Variance analysis was also computed to compare strategy use between groups, between strategy categories, and between individual items on the SILL.

Table 2 presents the results of overall SILL averages. Participants from China recorded an overall SILL mean of 3.43; those from Hungary recorded an overall mean of 3.15, and participants from Turkey recorded an overall mean of 3.26. Thus, strategies are "sometimes used" by all three groups.

The present study found no significant differences in overall SILL scores between the groups. Chinese background participants outscored their Hungarian and Turkish counterparts but not significantly (all of them fell within the "medium" use category).

Table 2  
Nationality & SILL Averages  
N=63

Ethnicity	N	Mean	SD
China	21	3.43	.47
Hungary	21	3.15	.32
Turkey	21	3.26	.38

The category averages are displayed in Table 3. The most preferred group of strategies for Chinese participants was "compensating for missing knowledge" (3.68) and "organizing and evaluating learning" (3.57). The least-preferred was "remembering more effectively" (3.18).

The most preferred strategy group for Hungarian participants was "organizing and evaluating learning" (3.55), followed by "learning with others" (3.38). The least preferred strategy group was again, as it was with Chinese participants, "remembering more effectively" (2.66).

Table 3  
SILL Category Averages

Nationality	Part					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
China	3.18	3.48	3.68	3.57	3.31	3.53
Hungary	2.66	3.21	3.34	3.55	2.68	3.38
Turkey	2.95	3.24	3.37	3.52	2.83	3.55

Turkish participants also show some similarities in their most preferred strategy as compared to their Chinese and Hungarian counterparts. The most preferred strategy group for Turkish participants was "learning with others" (3.55), followed by "organizing and evaluating learning" (3.52). However, the least preferred strategy group differed from the other ethnic groups, "managing emotions" (2.83).

McGroarty (1987) cited in Oxford, et al. (1995) found significant differences in strategy use according to language background. She found that Spanish learners favor highly traditional strategies such as using a dictionary to learn words. On the other hand Politzer and McGroarty (1985) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) discovered that students from Asian backgrounds prefer rote learning and language rules as opposed to more communicative strategies.

The above results showing similarities in preferring certain language learning strategies over others between the groups can be explained by the fact that they are all trained to be professionals in English Language Teaching. However, there is far more variation in strategy use according to category. In fact, there were significant differences in two categories "memory strategies" and "affective strategies" among the groups ( $p < 0,05$ ). The most interesting category result to emerge is the memory strategies including rote learning aspect, which was the least popular category for Chinese participants which is contrary to the general conception. This category was also the least popular category for Hungarian participants and second least popular category for Turkish participants who come from a very traditional form of education based on rote memorization.

Table 4  
SILL Strategy Averages

Item No.	Mean	SD	Strategy
China			
q.49	4.38	4.14	I ask questions in English
q.29	4.14	1.01	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.
q.8	4.09	.94	I review English lessons often
q.4	2.71	.90	I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
q.7	2.90	.88	I physically act out new English words.
q.6	2.95	1.02	I use flashcards to remember new English words.
Hungary			
q.32	4.47	.51	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
q.45	4.42	.81	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
q.29	4.38	.49	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.
q.43	1.19	.40	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.
q.5	1.61	.80	I use rhymes to remember new English words.
q.6	1.66	1.01	I use flashcards to remember new English words.

Turkey

q.38	4.42	.74	I think about my progress in learning English
q.32	4.33	.79	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
q.45	4.28	.71	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
q.43	1.38	.92	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.
q.7	2.09	1.04	I physically act out new English words.
q.6	2.23	1.37	I use flashcards to remember new English words.

Table 4 displays the individual SILL strategy averages. The most preferred strategy for Chinese participants was q.49 (4.38, I ask questions in English); q.29 (4.14, If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing), and q.8 (4.09, I review English lessons often). The least preferred strategies were q.4 (2.71, I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used); q.7 ( 2.90, I physically act out new English words), and q.6 ( 2.95, I use flashcards to remember new English words).

The most preferred strategy for participants from Hungary were q.32 (4.47, I pay attention when someone is speaking English); q.45 (4.42, If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again), and q.29 (4.38, If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing). The least preferred strategies were q.43 (1.19, I write down my feelings in a language learning diary); q.5 (1.61, I use rhymes to remember new English words), and q.6 (1.66, I use flashcards to remember new English words).

Turkish participants preferred q.38 (4.42, I think about my progress in learning English); q.32 (4.33, I pay attention when someone is speaking English), and q.45 (4.28, If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again. The least preferred strategies were q.43 (1.38, I write down my feelings in a language learning diary); q.7 (2.09, I physically act out new English words), and q.6 (2.23, I use flashcards to remember new English words).

Some interesting patterns emerge upon analysis of the most preferred and the least preferred individual strategies measured in SILL. While social concerns emerge for Chinese participants; metacognitive concerns emerge as major focuses for Hungarian and Turkish participants. However, when it comes to the least preferred strategies, except from Chinese participants, we observe a common preference focusing on keeping a diary, which comes from the affective category of strategies. This common preference continues with a better pattern with the rest of the least preferred strategies for all groups. This preference comes from memory category of strategies, and mainly focusing on using flashcards to remember new English words.

Finally, Post Hoc Tests were performed on each of the categories and each of the individual items to ascertain any significant differences among means of the groups. Table 5 summarizes the strategies that were found to be significantly different.

Table 5  
Significant Strategy Differences

Category A	Sig.
China-Hungary	p=.001
Category E	
China-Hungary	p=.002
China-Turkey	p=.021
Question 1	I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English
Turkey-China	p=.001
Question 5	I use rhymes to remember new English words
China-Hungary	p=.000
China-Turkey	p=.005
Turkey-Hungary	p=.045
Question 6	I use flashcards to remember new English words
China-Hungary	p=.001
China-Turkey	p=.049
Question 7	I physically act out new English words
China-Hungary	p=.000
China-Turkey	p=.008
Question 8	I review English lessons often
China-Hungary	p=.002
China-Turkey	p=.008
Question 17	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English
Turkey-Hungary	p=.007
Question 19	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English
China-Hungary	p=.026
Turkey-Hungary	p=.014
Question 22	I try not to translate word-for-word
Hungary-Turkey	p=.020
Question 23	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English
China-Hungary	p=.013
China-Turkey	p=.009
Question 25	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures
China-Turkey	p=.041
Question 28	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English
China-Hungary	p=.024
Question 32	I pay attention when someone is speaking English
Hungary-China	p=.001
Turkey-China	p=.011
Question 34	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English
China-Turkey	p=.012
Question 38	I think about my progress in learning English
Turkey-China	p=.005
Turkey-Hungary	p=.000
Question 43	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary
China-Hungary	p=.000
China-Turkey	p=.000
Question 44	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English
China-Hungary	p=.020
Question 46	I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk
China-Turkey	p=.042
Question 47	I practice English with others
Turkey-Hungary	p=.011

Note: All differences are significant at the .05 level

Significant differences in strategy use were found in two of the six strategy groups and in a total of 18 of the 50 individual strategies identified and measured by SILL. Thus, these results indicate that there are some major differences in patterns of strategy use between Chinese, Hungarian and Turkish background students. In category A, significant difference occurs in favor of China in comparison to Hungary, and in category E significant differences occur again in favor of China compared to Hungary and Turkey. Although it is the least preferred strategy for Chinese participants, still they use strategies of remembering more effectively than their Hungarian counterparts and strategies of managing their emotions compared to participants from Hungary and Turkey.

As for the significant differences based on individual strategies, Chinese participants use rhymes to remember new English words (q5), use flashcards to remember new English words (q6), physically act out new English words (q7), review English lessons (q8), look for similar words in both languages (q19), make summaries of what they hear or read in English (q23), guess what the other person will say next (q28), use language learning diaries (q43), and talk to someone else about their feelings when they learn English (q44) more often than Hungarian participants. Similarly Chinese participants use rhymes to remember new English words (q5), use flashcards to remember new English words (q6), physically act out new English words (q7), review English lessons (q8), make summaries of what they hear or read in English (q23), use gestures when they can not think of a word during a conversation (q25), plan time to study English (q34), use language learning diaries (q43), and ask English speakers to correct them when they talk more often than Turkish participants.

Hungarian participants pay more attention when someone is speaking English (q32) than Chinese participants and try not to translate word by word (q22) as compared to Turkish participants.

On the other hand, Turkish participants think more about their progress in learning English (q38), pay more attention when someone is speaking English (q32), and think of relationships between what they already know and new things they learn in English better than Chinese participants; whereas, they practice English with other students (q47), think about their progress in learning English (q38), look for similar words in both languages (q19), write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English (q17), and use rhymes to remember new English words (q5) more often than Hungarian participants.

## Conclusions & The Implications of the Study

This study sought to provide some evidence of the language-learning strategy use of ELT-majors who are preparing to become English teachers and to explore the kind of relationship, if any, exists between strategy use and nationality. According to the results of the SILL, the findings indicate that very little differences (although not at a significant level) in overall strategy use emerged among Chinese, Hungarian, and Turkish background ELT-major learners. This may be caused by the background of the participants who are all majoring in English Language Teaching

with presumably high motivation to learn English and already familiar with what strategies work to be successful. Within strategy categories, however, significant differences did emerge, and in terms of individual strategy use, major difference also emerged, especially in the most preferred strategy groups. There was a common base for the least preferred strategies. Some of the findings indicate that participants with Chinese background do not follow traditional patterns of strategy use, such as memory strategies, as identified in other major studies of language-learning strategies (i.e. Politzer and McGroarty,1985). This observation supports the findings of some recent researchers (Biggs, 1994; Cortazi and Jin, 1996; Littlewood 2000). As Littlewood (2000:31) points out “the need to question our preconceptions, and to explore in greater depth the nature and extent of cultural influences on learning”. It is clear that this particular group of ELT-major students have a different profile of language learning strategy preferences from the previous studies done in the same context but not necessarily with ELT-major students.

Since there has been no previous study, to the knowledge of this author, about Hungarian and very few studies about Turkish background students' use of strategies, and in general similar studies with ELT-major students, the findings of this study need to be verified through a replication study that seeks answers to similar questions posed in this study. Larger numbers of students need to be surveyed to ensure validity of research findings. Researchers need to look deeply into the variations in strategy use as defined by SILL categories and by individual strategies identified in the SILL. It can also be very interesting to consider how the teaching strategies of the participants are influenced by their university learning strategies. The potential for a longitudinal study with these participants seems to be interesting, if possible.

Although the SILL has been one of the most widely used instruments for measuring language-learning strategy use, to the knowledge of this author, it has not been tested widely with ELT-major students in EFL countries, like Hungary and Turkey, in a university setting. Therefore, It is hoped that this study will be of use to develop norms for these countries since Oxford et al. (1995:19) recommend finding "more information on how students from different cultural backgrounds and different countries utilize different strategies and prioritize common strategies differently". And as Littlewood concludes (2000:34) “we do not necessarily need to deny that culture influences behavior and learning styles in systematic ways. However, we still have a long way to go in exploring the nature and extent of this influence”.

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