

ENGLISH GRAMMAR LEARNING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE FOURTH YEAR MAJOR ENGLISH STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY AT A UNIVERSITY IN HANOI

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Abstract: *This study is aimed at finding out the English grammar learning strategies that have been used by university students. The data collected from 118 fourth-year major English students at the Faculty of English at a university in Hanoi. The information was gathered by using a questionnaire which was adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning with 34 question items. The results show that students used six English grammar learning strategies, with Cognitive strategies and Metacognitive strategies being the most popular, then Memory strategies, Affected strategies and Compensation strategies, and Affective Strategies being the lowest students' choice rating. Accordingly, some implications for English foreign language teachers and students were given. Hopefully, the results of the study may be useful for both teachers and students in their process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language.*

Keywords: *English grammar, learning strategies, university students*

I. Introduction

Grammar plays an important role in the process of teaching and learning a language. However, learning grammar well is not an easy task, especially learning a foreign language grammar. Therefore, learning grammar is still a major topic because grammar is one of the most crucial aspects of a language's foundation. In order to master the grammar of a language, there are factors that affect this process. One of which is the learners' learning strategies. Therefore, this study focuses on investigating students' English grammar learning strategies: a

case study at a university in Hanoi with the hope of helping students realize their strengths and weaknesses in using English grammar learning strategies and giving some recommendations and teaching implications to improve university students' English academic performances.

II. Literature review

2.1. Definition of grammar

Grammar, according to Richards et al (1992), is the structure of a language and the way linguistic components such as words and phrases are combined to generate statements. In the context of the

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larger discourse, it evaluates the meanings and goals of these phrases. They believe that grammar may or may not include a description of a language's sound. This explanation is comprehensive and precise, providing readers with a practical understanding of grammar.

From the above definition, in this study, grammar can be defined as the set of rules about word transformation or combinations with the ultimate goal is to help people organize and build sentences precisely. In fact, how grammar perceived may have an impact on the way it is taught and learned in the classroom.

2.2. Language learning strategies

2.2.1. Definition

Language learning strategies have received a great deal of attention in the field of language teaching and learning. Different language scholars have different points of view on language learning strategies.

In the early stage, Rubin (1975) describes learning strategies as the techniques or tools that a student could employ to acquire knowledge. Similarly, Nunan (1991) reports that "learning strategies are the mental processes which learners employ to learn and use the target language. However, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) argue that learning strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to assist them in comprehending, learning, or retaining new information". Clearly, the three definitions confine learning strategies to the mental processes that language learners employ over the course of their learning.

According to Scarcella & Oxford (1992), language learning strategies

consist of a variety of particular acts, behaviors, stages, or approaches which students adopt to boost their own learning. Most importantly, one of the definitions that has been found to be the most applicable, which has been mentioned the most frequently in the literature provided by Oxford (1990). In this definition, language learning strategies are "the specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations".

According to the foregoing, language learning strategies are considered necessary for language learners since they proved effective in assisting learners in improving their linguistic competence and autonomy.

In this study, we adopt Oxford (1990)'s points of view as a working definition of the study.

2.2.2. Types of language learning strategies

According to Oxford (1990), there are two sorts of learning strategies: *direct* and *indirect* strategies. Direct strategies are those that are directly associated with the process of learning language. They are further classified into three groups: *memory*, *cognitive*, and *compensatory*. Indirect strategies are ones that either aid in the execution of direct strategies or contribute to the success for those methods (Oxford, 1990). Indirect strategies can be classified into 3 types: *metacognitive*, *affective*, and *social strategy*. They are explained clearly as follows:

The first class of language learning strategies, known as direct learning strategies, are divided into three

major groups: memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. All of them require the mind to process language in different ways and for different reasons (Oxford, 1990).

(i) *Memory Strategies*, instructs language learners how to memorize, store, and recall specific knowledge necessary for conversation. They consist of four distinct strategies: forming mental associations, utilizing pictures and sounds, doing detailed evaluations, and carrying out activities. It can be observed that these strategies are easy to put in use as they call for relatively basic procedures like sorting, creating associations, and revisiting; however, learners are reportedly only occasionally employed in their learning activities.

(ii) *Cognitive Strategies*, provides pupils with a variety of strategies for comprehending and producing language. They are composed of four main sets of strategies: practice, signal reception and transmission, analysis and explanation, and input and output construction. They are seen as crucial by many language learners and are frequently found to be the most widely utilized methods.

(iii) *Compensation Strategies*, assists learners in overcoming their knowledge gaps when it comes to language use. That is, they can assist learners in using the new language for comprehension or production despite their blank spots of knowledge. The strategies include two subsets: Clever guessing and getting around limitations in speaking and writing. According to Oxford, these strategies contribute to the development of a sufficient range of grammar and vocabulary. She also points out that learners who are proficient in compensation techniques communicate

more effectively than those who know a greater number of target language terms and structures but are not proficient in compensation strategies. Because of this, it can be stated that she greatly values and regards compensatory strategies as being amongst the most critical tools available to language learners.

The second class of language learning strategies, indirect learning strategies, is known as a support to language learners in their learning process without requiring them to be directly involved in the target language itself. They can be divided into three categories: metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

(iv) *Metacognitive Strategies*, are behaviors that assist learners in organizing their learning process. By employing these strategies, students can overcome barriers to language learning such as complex rules, new terminology, lengthy grammar structures, and a variety of writing styles. These strategies involve sets of actions such as: focusing, organizing, and assessing one's learning. These sets appear to be beneficial to language learners because they encourage learners to devote time and effort to target language development, make all necessary arrangements to accomplish the language goal, and evaluate the quality of learning.

(v) *Affective Strategies*, assists learners in controlling their emotions, motivations, and attitudes. The tactics are divided into three categories: reducing anxiety, encouraging yourself, and managing your emotional temperature. According to Oxford (1990), language learning success or failure is affected by learners' affect. It is also stated that those who can control their emotions and feelings about learning are successful

language learners. As can be shown, good emotions and attitudes can inspire students to study more effectively, whereas negative emotions and attitudes have a detrimental influence on their language acquisition.

(vi) *Social Strategies*, are activities made by learners to seek assistance or interaction with other learners or more skilled language speakers (Oxford, 1990). As a result, students will have the chance to pick up knowledge from their classmates. For instance, it's feasible that less successful students will adopt the techniques used by more successful students if they do various grammatical assignments in groups.

As a whole, the above six groups of learning strategies: *memory, cognitive compensatory, metacognitive, affective* and *social strategies* are considered as the theoretical framework of the study to design a student questionnaire with 34 questions described in detail in section 3 below.

2.3. Grammar learning strategies

According to Oxford (2017), second language grammar learning strategies are considered as “teachable, dynamic thoughts and behaviors that learners consciously select and employ in specific contexts to improve their self-regulated, autonomous second language grammar development for effective task performance and long-term efficiency”. This concept highlights the essence of grammar learning strategies, which are dynamic, deliberate, conscious mental acts or processes that aid learners in their self-learning and even long-term journeys. Additionally, the definition has the potential to guide future research attempts due to the teachability of the grammar learning strategies. Educational academics can put instructing grammar learning strategies into practice in the hope

of assisting their students in obtaining language targets.

In terms of the classification of grammar learning strategies, it is said that there has been no systematic taxonomy of grammar learning strategies that has been officially proposed (Pawlak, 2009). However, while conducting research on grammar learning strategies, researchers frequently use a taxonomy of language learning to examine, synthesize, and evaluate data. Oxford's classification scheme of language learning strategies, in particular, has been used by many researchers as a theoretical framework for investigations into students' English grammar learning strategies.

To summarize, given that Oxford's classification has been the most detailed taxonomy compared to other classifications (discussed in 2.2.3), and it has been utilized by a number of academics in education field, and thereby the researcher chose to use Oxford's language learning strategy system as the theoretical framework of this study.

III. Methodology

The study was conducted with the population of 118 fourth year major English students from three groups in the academic year 2022-2023 at the Faculty of English, at a university in Hanoi. There were 25 males and 93 females who were at the age of 22 and 23. They have been learning English for almost over 8 years, and are taking the same compulsory English course of the university and are taught by the same teacher of English. Their English competence is about equivalent to upper-intermediate (level C1) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, some demonstrate their competency in English at level B2.

This is a survey-based research project that uses one type of instrument, which is a questionnaire. Technically, the questionnaire was distributed to gather information via online with the google form designed.

For the study questionnaire design, the researcher made a modified version of five-point frequency scale questionnaires which are Oxford's (1990) version 7.0 ESL/EFL Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL) as mentioned in 2.2.2 and Bayou's (2015) Grammar Learning Strategies Questionnaire. Indeed, they have been recognized as an important tool in numerous studies investigating the frequency of language learning techniques utilized by students from various countries all around the world. They have also been used to demonstrate how much strategy utilization relates with other characteristics such as students' level of proficiency, environment, etc.

Because the current study was solely focused on learning grammar, the items related to language learning strategies were far too broad in scope, thus the researcher made a modification to make it more relevant to the research topic. All of the items about listening, speaking, and learning language were eliminated or altered. Then, they were reflected on the types of strategies to be relevant to the investigation on the learners' grammar learning strategies. In addition, after each key strategy, the researcher adds a sub-question section, which is a place for students to share more about how they learned grammar. The author wanted to find out if students were still using any more of the strategies listed, or if they had added any new strategies during their learning grammar process.

The questionnaire deals with 6 groups of 34 statements that were classified by Oxford (1990). There were 7 statements in Group 1 of Memory Strategies. Group 2 involved 8 statements about Cognitive Strategies. Group 3 consisted of 2 statements pertaining to Compensation Strategies. Group 4 contained 8 statements discussing Metacognitive Strategies. Group 5 consisted of 5 statements for Affective Strategies, and Group 6 consisted of 4 statements on Social Strategies. The last section of each group deals with students' other strategies used in their learning English grammar. The individuals were asked to react on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (always or almost always true of me) to 5 (never or almost never true of me). A completed response would be estimated to take around 15 minutes but the researcher gave students 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Data analysis then was synthesized. Thereby, the scale proposed by Oxford (1990) is utilized as the main frame for collecting and drawing results for the questionnaire, which can be seen as follows.

IV. Findings and discussion

In this section, the data of English grammar learning strategies employed by the fourth year major English students will be analyzed with discussion according to 6 groups as mentioned below.

4.1. Students' English grammar learning strategies

4.1.1. Memory strategies

Overall, as can be seen from chart 1, the most frequency of using Memory strategies is *usually* in almost all of the

item questions with high percentage, accounting for about 40%. Besides, the frequency of *sometimes* is fluctuated in all item questions with second ranking percentage, accounted for from over 55% to over 25% from *try to remember a new structure to review grammar lessons regularly*. The degree of *always* remains average, around 20%, except for two question items, *circle or high structures to remember them* and *review grammar lessons regularly*, nearly 40%. *Never* and *rarely* is the lowest ones, below 10%, for two question items, *try to come up with sentences of new structures to remember them better* and *find out the relationship between the grammar structures*.

Asked about other learning strategies in learning English grammar regarding Memory strategies, there are 33 responses, including practicing by making up simple sentences with grammar structures, watching English videos on YouTube, listening to English music, writing English grammar structures on note-taking paper ticking them everywhere and playing quizzes.

Thus, it can be said that, almost all students have utilized memory strategies on how to memorize, store, and recall specific knowledge in learning English grammar. In addition, they are active in practicing and learning English grammar with their own strategies.

4.1.2. Cognitive strategies

Similar with Memory strategies used by the students, chart 2 shows that, the most degree of frequency used in Cognitive strategies is *usually*, despite the fact that it fluctuates in some criteria, ranging from around 40% to 60%, with the highest question item *write down structures, exceptions, and examples from several reference materials* (about 69%).

Sometimes is seen at various records, however it is still ranked second in general approximately from below 30% to nearly 50%, but it gets higher in comparison with *always* which is with the choice witnessed from 20% to 30%. It stays at an average level with *rarely* and *never* again are still the minimal preferences among students vary from 0% to above 10% with 3 questions, except for *try to apply the rules to participate in conversation, read different texts written English* and *try to practice a new grammar structure*. It is a great point with the results.

About the question of alternative learning methods, 24 students have raised their opinions. It could be conducted typically in two suggestions which are approaching online quiz and practicing exercise frequently.

As a whole, all students have used almost all items in this strategy with highest encouraging numbers to practice, signal reception and transmission, analysis and explanation, and input and output construction.

4.1.3. Compensation strategies

Moving on to the third strategy which is Compensation. *Usually* choice once again reaches the highest point, peaks at around 55% with all two question items, *when not confident to apply a grammar structures, using Google to check the correct version of structure and not sure of using one structure, trying to use other structures or Vietnamese to deliver the message, then asking the teacher the appropriate one later*. The second preference belongs to *sometimes* and *always* alternately with the greatest choice of *always* is above 40% for the question of using Google to check the grammar structure and *sometimes* is around 35%

with using other structure or Vietnamese to deliver a message. Interestingly, *when not confident to apply a grammar structure, using Google to check the correct version of structure* achieves over 40% with *always* frequency. *Never* choices is not a relative percentage respectively.

The answer for the question of different habits for the compensation strategies is recorded at zero.

Therefore, it can be said that all students have used this strategy to contribute to the development of a sufficient range of grammar.

4.1.4. Metacognitive strategies

Having a deeper research on the Metacognitive Strategies, it could be observed that in overall view, it is quite different from the previous strategies. In this criterion, the first place is unpredictable as *usually* is no longer the most favorite in all questions, instead of *sometimes* is climbing steadily to the top with 8 question items. There are three point of views that *usually* ranked first from around 50% to 60%, *look for chances to read or speak English, notice and learn from my grammatical mistakes, and pay attention to the rules provided*, while *sometimes* accounts for four top choice averagely stays at around 50% with almost question items, expect for *notice and learn from my grammatical mistakes and pay attention to rules provided* below 40%. The level of *always* remains average while *rarely* and *never* are the lowest pick.

There are seven ideas that have been raised when they are asked about different Metacognitive strategies. Some of them can be called creating mind maps, doing quizzes and taking a number of English's exercise.

Obviously, students are aware of the importance of organizing activities in their learning process in all focusing, organizing, and assessing students' learning English grammar.

4.1.5. Affective strategies

Another strategy that has been taken into research is Affective Strategies. In this strategy, it can be seen that the highest position fluctuates between *usually* and *sometimes*. While *usually* with three among 5 opinions ranks top, and the highest recorded at below 60% with *encourage myself to use the rules*. *Sometimes* accounts for two best answers ranging from around 40% to 50% with 5 question items. The average position still belongs to *always* with the same level from 20% to 30%. *Never* choices is absent with three last questions items, but there is a small number with two first ones.

There is only one alternative answer for the question of other ideal affective strategies is "learning when your mind is at peace".

Clearly, most students know how to control their emotions, motivations, and attitudes by reducing anxiety, encouraging themselves, and managing their emotional temperature.

4.1.6. Social strategies

The last strategy being discussed is Social Strategies. This strategy, *usually* once again ranked first in most roughly about 50%, except for the last opinion, *practice grammar rules by working with other students*. However, *usually* ranks second (40%) after *sometimes* (below 50%). In other opinions, *sometimes* accounted for the second place around 40% to 45%, which most of that are double the choice of *always* at average

20%. *Rarely* and *never* stayed as the last preference, accounting from 0 to 3% with the first and the third question items.

The two different answers for the question of alternative methods are “getting to know as many friends as possible” and applying a quiz for improvement.

Undoubtedly, students try to use this strategy to pick up their knowledge in a social context.

4.1.7. *The most frequently used strategies*

On the basis of the above analysis of the students’ responses to the questionnaire, the average percentage of the students’ applying six strategy groups in learning English grammar will be compared and illustrated with a bar chart to find out the most frequently used strategies.

In short, as pointed out in the chart 7 above, the fourth-year major English students at the Faculty of English a university in Hanoi used a variety of English grammar learning strategies, including Memory Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, Metacognitive Strategies, Compensation Strategies, Affective Strategies, and Social Strategies. Although there were differences in the use of English grammar learning strategies, the degrees of use were consistent, based on the scales proposed by Oxford (1990).

Overall, there are differences in the average frequency with which English grammar learning strategies are used. The students tend to use more direct strategies than indirect strategies.

In terms of frequency, *usually* of all the strategies is used with the highest percentage of all strategies, ranking from over 38% to 44%, the highest percentage is Compensation strategies and the lowest

one is Affective strategies. The second one is sometimes, scaling from over 37% of Metacognitive strategies to about 24% of Compensation strategies. The third position of frequency used by students is always, fluctuating from about 26% with Compensate strategies to about 16% of Memory strategies. *Rarely* frequency used is very low with the highest one for Affective strategies and the lowest one for Compensation strategies. Lastly, *never* frequency used is not worth considering, accounting for around 1% for 5 strategies.

In terms of 6 strategies, in general, Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies, two most important strategies, scored the highest percentage, implicating that students are active in practicing, analyzing and explaining their input and output learning outcomes and that students have known how to organize their learning process in focusing, organizing, and assessing their learning to overcome barriers to language learning such as complex rules, new terminology, lengthy grammar structures.

The second students’ rating choices is Memory strategies that encourage learners to devote time and effort to target language development, make all necessary arrangements to accomplish the language goal, and evaluate the quality of learning.

The third result of students’ English learning grammar strategies is Affected strategies that means students know how to control their emotions, motivations, and attitudes in order to reduce anxiety, encourage themselves, and manage their emotional temperature and will help them to become successful language students. As can be shown previously, good emotions and attitudes can inspire students to study more effectively, whereas

negative emotions and attitudes have a detrimental influence on their language acquisition.

The fourth strategy used by the students is Social strategies, namely, students themselves seek assistance or interaction with other students or more skilled language speakers to widen and consolidate their knowledge.

The last strategies chosen by students are *Compensation Strategies*. Personally, I think this strategy is one of the most important ones which helps students overcome their knowledge gaps when it comes to language use. Perhaps, our participants are young adults and the fourth-year major English students, they have, to some extent, the foundation of speaking, writing skills and a sufficient range of grammar and vocabulary. But I think they should take this strategy into consideration.

To summarize, the fourth-year English major students at the Faculty of English at a university in Hanoi employed both direct and indirect English grammar learning strategies; more specifically, they used six groups of English grammar learning strategies, each to varying degrees, with the most frequently used strategies being Cognitive strategies.

4.2. Suggested solutions to improve students' English grammar learning strategies

The findings of the study would provide rich assistance to foreign language teachers to help students improve their learning strategies in general, their English grammar learning strategies in particular. Based on these strategies, teachers of English can better analyze their existing pedagogy and create plans to enhance

their English grammar instruction. For example, in the Metacognitive strategies group, Oxford points out one sub-strategy which is "Arranging and planning your learning" with three different detailed ones. Teachers of English can certainly use it in their classrooms by creating activities to use with their students, such as creating a weekly schedule. This activity requires students to create a weekly schedule to organize their learning, and so on. Indeed, the detailed set of strategies have been demonstrated that her system has undergone extensive testing with teachers in a variety of language settings. Noticeably, teachers should assist students in mastering these strategies by providing them with knowledge regarding the findings of this study and instruct them on their ways of applying English learning strategies.

To begin, teachers of English should introduce their students the concept of learning strategies for grammar. The idea must be accompanied by detailed instructions on what it is, why it should be used, and the advantages it may bring to students both within and outside the classroom. The introduction might be incorporated into regular classes. In turn, students will have more chances to practice until it gets ingrained in their learning habits. They should encourage students to take more ownership of their education. Teachers should be closer with students to enhance students' learning, involving various aspects of the learner's personality, including metacognitive, emotional, social, and other functions because all six strategies are influenced by the student's motivation, gender, nationality, age, learning style, etc. The second option is for instructors to begin the university year with a brief session on

grammar learning strategies and practices. In order to do this, a great deal of thought and planning must be put into place.

For students themselves, they should be aware of a variety of grammar-learning strategies, including six learning strategies, especially Compensation and Metacognitive strategies and combining their own favorite learning strategies to self-regulate their learning and to monitor the efficiency of these strategies.

V. Conclusion

Finally, the outcomes of this study may be useful to other English foreign language students who are struggling with their academic performance. In fact, improving one's language and academic performance is a result of employing a variety of strategies. Thus, individuals should be encouraged to apply all the strategies, especially Compensation strategies, one of the most important strategies. Especially, this study helps teacher and students of English have a deep understanding of their students Grammar learning strategies, especially for teachers and the fourth-year major English students at a university in Hanoi

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