An Analysis of the Relationship Between the Use of Grammar Learning Strategies and Student Achievement at English Preparatory Classes

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the ways in which some language learners make conscious efforts to learn English grammar more efficiently, which strategies they use in language learning, whether a particular learning strategies favors certain strategies or not, if it does, what those strategies are and relationships between strategy use and learner achievement in grammar learning.

The use of grammar learning strategies of the students in prep school at the University of Gaziantep was investigated in this study. The relationship between students' choice of learning strategies in grammar and foreign language achievement was investigated. To sum up, do the use of grammar learning strategies have a positive effect on the student achievement? By knowing this, we can help the students and improve their learning habits.

Key Words: Questionnaire, grammar learning strategies, student achievement.

Özet

Bu çalışma bazı öğrencilerin İngilizce dilbilgisini daha etkin bir şekilde öğrenmeleri için bilinçli çaba gösterip göstermediklerini, dil öğreniminde hangi stratejileri kullandıklarını, bir öğrenme stratejisinin diğerlerine tercih edilip edilmediğini, eğer ediliyorsa bunların hangileri olduğu, dil bilgisi öğreniminde strateji kullanımı ile öğrenci başarısı arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaktadır.

Bu çalışmada, Gaziantep Üniversitesi Hazırlık Okulundaki öğrencilerin dilbilgisi öğrenme stratejilerini kullanımları araştırıldı. Öğrencilerin dilbilgisindeki öğrenme strateji seçimleri ve yabancı dil başarıları arasındaki ilişki araştırıldı. Özet olarak, dilbilgisi öğrenme stratejilerinin öğrenci başarısında olumlu bir etkisi var mıdır? Bunu bildiğimizde öğrencilerimize yardımcı olabilir ve onların öğrenme alışkanlıklarını geliştirebiliriz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anket, dilbilgisi öğrenme stratejileri, öğrenci başarısı.

1. Introduction

Language leaning strategies, while non-observable, consciously or unconsciously used in some cases, give language teachers valuable clues about how their students assess the situation, plan, select appropriate skills so as to understand, learn, or remember new input presented in the classroom.

Since there has been given greater emphasis to learners and learning rather than teachers and teaching, it is important to know how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information. It is known that some learners learn a

second language better or faster and others do not, even within the same environment. There is no way or method of effective teaching for all students. For this reason, it can be helpful for the teachers to get information about the learners and their characteristics.

Oxford defines learning strategies (1990:8) as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more transferable to new situations. Wenden and Rubin also define learning strategies (1987:19) as '… any set of operations, steps, plans routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieved, and usage of information.

Most of teachers of English have been searching for new ways in order to be more successful or help their students to become proficient students in learning a foreign or a second language. They must know that what students do while learning a second language or foreign language. Researchers have analyzed language-learning strategies and found out that students' learning strategy choice is related to students' purposes and the task they are engaged in (Oxford, 1990:8).

Particularly, developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies. Chastain (1988:164) states that all students have learning strategies; some are successful and some are not. Teachers have two equally important obligations in class. One is to teach students how to learn, that is, learning strategies that will enhance learning in the subject for someone with their particular learning style. In general, teachers are much more attentive to product of learning than process of learning.

1.1 Good Language Learners

There have been done a lot of research about the characteristics of language learners. Good L2 learners are willing and accurate guessers; have a strong drive to communicate; are often uninhibited; are willing to make mistakes; focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing; take advantage of all practice opportunities; monitor their speech as well as that of others; and pay attention to meaning (Oxford, 1994).

1.2. Direct Strategies for Dealing with Language

Language learning strategies that are directly involved in language learning are called direct strategies. All direct strategies require mental processing of language, but three groups of direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation) do this processing differently and for different purposes. Memory strategies help the students store and retrieve new information. Cognitive strategies help them understand and produce new language by many different means. Compensation strategies allow them to use the language in spite of gaps in knowledge.

1.2.1. Memory strategies

Memory strategies are regarded as mental tools and fall into four sets: Creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, and employing actions. Memory strategies are more effective when they are used with metacognitive strategies.

1.2.2 Cognitive Strategies

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), cognitive strategies operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) in O'Malley and Chamot (1990:44) subsumed these strategies under three broad groupings: rehearsal, organization, and elaboration processes (which may include other strategies that rely on at least in part upon knowledge in long-term memory such as inferencing, summarizing, deduction, imagery and transfer).

1.2.3 Compensation Strategies

According to Oxford (1990: 47-48), compensation strategies are helpful to use the new language for comprehension or production in spite of limitations in knowledge. Compensation strategies also help for repertoire or grammar and especially vocabulary. Compensation strategies exist as ten parts which are divided into two sets: Guessing intelligently in listening and reading, and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing.

1.3 Indirect Strategies for General Management of Learning

Indirect strategies can be divided as metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. All theses strategies are indirect because they support language learning without directly involving in the target language. Indirect strategies can be helpful for all four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

Metacognitive strategies are used to oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning. Wenden's studies (1982) in Wenden and Rubin (1987:25) focused on what learners know about various aspects of their language learning and how this influences their choice of strategies.

1.3.1. Affective Strategies

Language learners can gain control over language by the help of affective strategies. Affective strategies are divided three sets: Lowering your anxiety, encouraging yourself, and taking your emotional temperature. The affective factors may become one of the biggest factors on language learners for their success or failure.

1.3.2. Social Strategies

According to Oxford (1990:144), language is a form of social behavior and communication. Communication can only occur between and among people. Thus, in communication process, appropriate social strategies are very important. Social strategies are divided as three sets: Asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others.

1.4. Grammar Learning Strategies

Grammar is important because it is the language that makes it possible for us to talk about language. Grammar names the types of words and word groups that make up sentences not only in English, but in any language. As human beings, we can put sentences together even as children. But to be able to talk about how sentences are built, about the types of words and word groups that make up

sentences - that is knowing about grammar. And knowing about grammar offers a window into the human mind and into our amazingly complex mental capacity.

Teaching grammar was a central concern in English language teaching. We often talk about 'knowing' the structure of a language. This can mean two things. First, it can refer to the unconscious ability to use the structure of a language to convey meaning. Secondly, 'knowing' the structure of a language may refer to the information that has been acquired through studying structural descriptions. We call these two types of knowledge 'unconscious' and 'acquired.' This distinction is important, because it is relevant to what the student needs to know and what the teacher needs to know. The student needs to be able to produce correct sentences automatically. Teachers cannot presume to have taught students a particular structure by getting them to memorize the rules.

1.5. Scope

This study was conducted to all of the Preparatory School students at the University of Gaziantep in 2004-2005 Academic year in order to know to what extent they use grammar learning strategies and the effect of grammar learning strategies on the students' achievement.

1.6. Limitation

A Grammar Learning Strategy Questionnaire, which consists of 43 items, was administered to the all of the Preparatory School students. Most of the items in the questionnaire consist of grammar learning strategies, but there may be some other grammar learning strategies that are not mentioned in the questionnaire. Since grammar is important in language learning, students were supposed to learn grammar successfully.

1.7. Research Questions

The followings are the research questions that the study aimed to answer:

1. Is there a relationship between strategy use and the students' success in grammar?
2. Do the students use Grammar Learning Strategies?
3. To what extent do the students use Grammar learning strategies while learning English?
4. Are there any differences between good language learners (the students who score 60 or above) and poor learners(the students who score below 60) in using grammar learning strategies?
5. Is there a relationship between gender of the students and the use of grammar learning strategies?
6. Is there a relationship between educational background of the students and the use of grammar learning strategies?
7. Is there a relationship between duration that students have taken English courses and the use of grammar learning strategies?

1.8. Assumptions

In this study, it was assumed that:

1. The tools that were used in data collection were valid and reliable.

2. The tests that were given to the students for the whole year were valid and reliable.

3. The students answered the questions, which were used in the questionnaire, willingly and clearly.

4. The performance of the instructors was assumed to be the same.

5. The findings of this study are limited to the students who attended almost one-year preparatory English class at the University of Gaziantep. Because of this, the findings could not be generalized to the entire population learning English as a foreign language throughout Turkey or elsewhere.

2.Data Collection Tools and Techniques Presentation

Two testing instruments were used to collect data: achievement grades of the students and the second is a Grammar Learning Strategies Questionnaire. The students, who score 60 or above 60, are accepted as successful and the students, who score below 60, are accepted as unsuccessful.

A 43-item questionnaire consists of three parts of Grammar Learning Strategies such as cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies. A five choice Likert type of questionnaire was developed in order to assess the subject levels of agreement or disagreement in a quantifiable manner such as:

Never   = 1
Seldom   = 2
Sometimes   = 3
Usually   = 4
Always   = 5

Students were required to respond to 43 statements. The total time allowed to fill in the questionnaire was 15 minutes. The items in the questionnaire were in the statement form, Turkish and they were mainly depended upon Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies and grammar teaching/learning methods. In addition, the researcher developed some other original strategies. The points for the answers were summed up for each column and average for each part and the overall average were calculated. These should be within the range of 1.0 to 5.0. The average for each part showed which set of strategies was more favored by students. The overall average showed how frequently students use grammar learning strategies as the following:

Levels of the Strategy Use		Mean
	Always or almost always used	4.5 to 5.0
High		
	Usually used	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5 to 3.4
	Generally not used	1.5 to 2.4
Low		
	Never or almost never used	1.0 to 1.4

In the first phase of the study, a Grammar Learning Strategies Questionnaire consist of 43 items was piloted to 49 students from different levels of students to test the reliability of the questionnaire as a preliminary study.

The questionnaire items were classified according to Oxford's taxonomy of learning strategies. The questionnaire consists of three sections:

- Part A (items from 1 to 17): Cognitive Strategies (Using mental processes)
- Part B (items from 18 to 36): Metacognitive (Organizing and evaluating learning)
- Part C (items from 37 to 43): Social/affective (learning with others/managing emotions)

2.1. Reliability of the Questionnaire

The Split-half technique was used to measure the reliability of the questionnaire. The Split-half reliability coefficient was calculated to be 0,72 and 0,71 which were defined to be reliable for Likert-type attitude scales.

2.2. Research Population

There were 425 participants (from the total of 578, 153 students were absent) in the study from all levels (in level A, 3 groups, in level B 3 groups, and in level C 17 groups) in the English Preparatory School of the University of Gaziantep in the Academic year of 2001-2002. Sampling was not used in this study, because the questionnaire was distributed to all of the English Preparatory School students.

The achievement grades of the students were calculated from four midterm exams, 22 quizzes and one final exam. The averages of 75% midterms and 25% of the quizzes are taken. The averages of

60% of these exams and 40% of the final exam are taken and summed for the achievement grades of the students. The students, who get 60 and above 60, are accepted as successful students and the students, who get below 60, are accepted as unsuccessful students.

3. Findings

3.1. Analysis of the results of grammar learning strategies and the students' achievement grades

Table 1 The degree of difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and student achievement

Grammar Learning Strategies	Achievement		Mean	Std. Deviation	t- value	Sig.
COGNITIVE	Unsuccessful	30	3,14	,47	-1,186	,236
	Successful	95	3,19	,44		
META-COGNITIVE	Unsuccessful	30	3,33	,43	-,557	,578
	Successful	95	3,35	,39		
SOCIAL/ AFFECTIVE	Unsuccessful	30	3,26	,65	,222	,824
	Successful	95	3,25	,67		
TOTAL	Unsuccessful	30	3,24	,41	-,765	,445
	Successful	95	3,27	,36		

3.2. Analysis of the results of grammar learning strategies and based on gender difference

Table 2. The degree of difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and gender.

Grammar Learning Strategies	SEX		Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig.
COGNITIVE	FEMALE	1	3,26	,45	2,087	037
	MALE	34	3,15	,45		
META-COGNITIVE	FEMALE	1	3,39	,38	1,168	244
	MALE	34	3,33	,41		
SOCIAL/ AFFECTIVE	FEMALE	1	3,41	,55	2,915	004
	MALE	34	3,21	,69		
TOTAL	FEMALE	1	3,41	,34	2,430	016
	MALE	34	3,24	,38		

To assess the degree of difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and gender, t-test was applied. According to t-test results, the difference among gender, metacognitive and social/affective strategies is statistically significant because of P being below 0.05(P<0.05), but in cognitive strategies it is not statistically significant because of P being above 0.05((P>0.05). In conclusion, gender has an effect on the use of metacognitive and social/affective strategies and does not have significant effect on cognitive strategies.

3.3. Analysis of the results of grammar learning strategies and the duration that the students have taken English courses

Table 3. The degree of difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and the durations that the students have taken English courses.

Grammar Learning Strategies		Sum of Squares	f	Mean Square		Sig.
COGNITIVE	Between Groups	1,519		,760	,709	025
	Within Groups	85,598	18	,205		
	Total	87,118	20			
META-COGNITIVE	Between Groups	1,630		,815	,970	007
	Within Groups	68,552	18	,164		
	Total	70,182	20			
SOCIAL/ AFFECTIVE	Between Groups	,616		,308	678	508
	Within Groups	190,098	18	,455		
	Total	190,715	20			
TOTAL	Between Groups	1,358		,679	,803	009
	Within Groups	59,083	18	,141		
	Total	60,441	20			

To assess the degree of difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and the duration that the students have taken English courses, one-way ANOVA was applied. According to one-way ANOVA results, the difference among metacognitive, cognitive strategies and the duration is

statistically significant because of P being below 0.05(P<0.05), but it is not statistically significant for social effective strategies.

3.4. Analysis of the results of grammar learning strategies and educational background of the students

Table 4 The degree of difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and the type of the student high school backgrounds.

Grammar Learning Strategies	High Schools		Mean	Std. Deviation
COGNITIVE	ANATOLIAN	5	3,04	,37
	SUPER	2	3,20	,42
	GENERAL	07	3,22	,46
	VOCATIONAL	2	3,26	,57
	OTHER	9	3,10	,53
	Total	25	3,18	,45
META-COGNITIVE	ANATOLIAN	5	3,21	,38
	SUPER	2	3,32	,35
	GENERAL	07	3,41	,41
	VOCATIONAL	2	3,47	,30
	OTHER	9	3,27	,49
	Total	25	3,35	,40
SOCIAL/ AFFECTIVE	ANATOLIAN	5	3,10	,63

	SUPER	2	3,35	,65
	GENERAL	07	3,28	,64
	VOCATIONAL	2	3,28	,69
	OTHER	9	3,13	,86
	Total	25	3,25	,67
TOTAL	ANATOLIAN	5	3,13	,33
	SUPER	2	3,28	,34
	GENERAL	07	3,31	,37
	VOCATIONAL	2	3,36	,41
	OTHER	9	3,18	,46
	Total	25	3,26	,37

When we assess the degree of difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and the type of the student high school backgrounds, we see difference between the students who are graduated from Anatolian high school (mean:3,04) and Vocational high school (mean: 3,26) in using metacognitive strategies. We can also see difference between the students who have Anatolian high school backgrounds (mean:3,21) and Vocational high school background (mean: 3,47) in using cognitive strategies. In social/affective strategies, there is difference between Anatolian group (mean:3,10) and super group(mean:3,35).

The results obtained in this study indicate that the two groups (the students who graduated from Anatolian High Schools and from Super High Schools) differed in using the overall grammar learning strategies. This may indicate that the students, who graduated from Anatolian High Schools, have knowledge about grammar learning strategies, and the students, who graduated from Super high Schools, try to find as many strategies as they can in order to be successful. As it is mentioned by Oxford (1990:1), use of appropriate language learning strategies improves proficiency

and causes self-confidence.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Conclusions concerning the research question 1 "Is there a relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies and students' achievement"

There is no significant difference between unsuccessful and successful students in using the overall use of grammar learning strategies.   In conclusion, it can be concluded that both unsuccessful students and unsuccessful students use grammar learning strategies nearly in equal amount. This indicates that there is not much significant relationship between use of grammar learning strategies and students' achievement.

4.2. Conclusions concerning the research question 2" Do the students use grammar learning strategies?"

Most of the students (70.20%) use grammar learning strategies that consist of cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective.

4.2.1 Conclusions concerning cognitive learning strategies

Cognitive strategies are the items that are listed 1-17 in the questionnaire. Successful (mean:3,19) and unsuccessful students (mean:3,14) use cognitive grammar learning strategies nearly in equal amount. According to Oxford's frequency table (Oxford 1990:300), all of the students (mean: 3,16) sometimes used cognitive grammar learning strategies. Cognitive strategies are essential for a new target language learning. Both successful and unsuccessful students use cognitive strategies while learning grammar.

4.2.2. Conclusions concerning metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive grammar learning strategies are the items that are listed 18-36 in the questionnaire. Successful students (mean:3,35) and unsuccessful students (mean:3.33) use metacognitive grammar learning strategies equally. According to Oxford's frequency table (1990:300), all of the students sometimes used metacognitive strategies.

4.2.3. Conclusions concerning social/affective strategies

Social/affective strategies are the items that are listed between 37-43 in the questionnaire. According to the results that were obtained from percentages table, more than half of the students have clear goals for improving their grammatical knowledge. Most of the students try to find out how to be a better learner of English. Similarly, most of them think about their progresses in learning English grammar.

Nearly half of the students prefer group work to individual work. Most of them notice their grammatical mistakes and use this knowledge to help them do better later. Besides this, most of them try to take part in class activities in order to use the new structures.

In conclusion, both successful (mean: 3,25) and unsuccessful students (mean:3,26) use metacognitive strategies nearly in equal amount. According to Oxford's frequency table (1990:300), all of the students sometimes used social/affective strategies.

4.3. Conclusions concerning the research question 3" To what extent do the students use grammar learning strategies?"

70.20% of the students use grammar learning strategies while learning English. According to Oxford (1990:300), all of the students sometimes used the overall grammar learning strategies (mean: 32,26).

4.4. Conclusions concerning the research question 4"Are there any differences good and poor language learners in using grammar learning strategies?"

Both good (70.76%) and poor language learners (70.28%) use grammar learning strategies equally. This reveals the fact that there is no difference between good and poor language learners in using grammar learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990:300), both good (mean:32,27) and poor language learners (mean: 3,24) sometimes used grammar learning strategies.

4.5. Conclusions concerning the research question 5" Is there a relationship between gender of the students and the use of grammar learning strategies?".

Female students (mean score of cognitive strategies:3,26) use cognitive grammar learning strategies more frequently than male students (mean:3,15) do. Similarly, female students (mean:3,39) use metacognitive grammar learning strategies slightly higher than male students (mean:3,33) do. Besides this, female students (mean:3,41) use social/affective grammar learning strategies higher than male students (mean:3,21) do. It can be concluded that female students use the overall strategies higher than male students do.

4.6. Conclusions concerning the research question 6" Is there a relationship between educational background of the students and the use of grammar learning strategies?"

The students, who graduated from vocational high schools (mean: 3,26), use cognitive grammar learning strategies higher than those, who graduated from Anatolian high schools (mean:3,04), do. Similarly, the students, who graduated from vocational high schools (mean: 3,41), use metacognitive learning strategies higher than those, who graduated from Anatolian high schools (mean:3,21), do. Moreover, the students who graduated from vocational high schools (mean: 3,28), use social/affective learning strategies higher than those, who graduated from Anatolian high schools (mean:3,10), do. These findings indicate that the students, who graduated from vocational high schools, use the overall grammar learning strategies higher than those from Anatolian high schools.

4.7. Conclusions concerning the research question 7"Is there a the duration that the students has taken English courses and the use of grammar learning strategies?"

The students, who have English background of 1-3 years (mean:3,23), use cognitive strategies higher than the students who have English background of 6-10 years (mean:3,10). Similarly, the students, who have English background of 1-3 years (mean:3,40), appear to be using metacognitive

strategies higher than those ,who have English background of 6-10 years (mean:3,26),do. Besides, the students ,who have English background of 1-3 years (mean:3,32), use the overall grammar learning strategies higher than those, who have English background of 6-10 years   (mean:3,19), do. This may indicate that the students, who have English background of 1-3 years, use grammar learning strategies higher than those, who have English background of 6-10 years, do because of the fact that new students try to use a lot of strategies that they are able to do in order to learn grammar better.

5. Discussion of the Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies and student achievement. In the research it has been proven that there is not a high statistical significant difference between the use of grammar learning strategies and students achievement.

Successful second language learners are aware of the strategies they use and why they use them. They are capable of using these strategies for the given tasks and for their personal needs as learners, while learning a second or foreign language. Some students who are less successful can also identify some of these strategies, however, they do not know how to choose the appropriate strategies and how to use them in a given task.

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Biography

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