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A Comparison of Turkish and Bosnian EAP Students' Adoption of Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract
The number of the undergraduate Turkish students studying at universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina has increased over the past few years. They usually study at the universities where the language of instruction is English, namely International University of Sarajevo and International Burch University. This research explores the differences in the adoption of language learning strategies between Turkish and Bosnian university students learning English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Fall 2015, one hundred and forty Bosnian (n=140) and ninety-two Turkish (n=92) freshman university students were surveyed with the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning – SILL 7.0 (Oxford, 1990) at International University of Sarajevo. The results revealed statistically significant differences in the adoption of memory, cognitive, and affective strategies. The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in the adoption of compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies. In addition, an independent T-test showed a statistically significant difference in the overall adoption of the SILL strategies. The results show that cultural background partly accounts for preferences over particular language learning strategy clusters.

Keywords: EAP, Strategies, Turkish, Bosnian, SILL, Bosnia

1. Introduction

International University of Sarajevo and International Burch University, both located in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), have attracted a high number of Turkish students over the past few years. It is estimated that there may be approximately 1,500 Turkish university students studying at these institutions at the moment. Since the language of instruction in both schools is English, there is a demand for a periodical evaluation of the EAP curricula designed to meet the needs of Bosnian, Turkish, and other students. This research is based on the premise that studying students' language learning strategies can improve the quality of instructional design.

2. Language learning strategies and cultural background

Rubin (1975) defines learning strategies as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (cited in Griffiths, 2004, p.1). Griffiths (2004) explains that the term 'strategy' itself is controversial, yet widely used. She adds that the terms such as 'learning behaviors', 'tactics', and 'techniques' have also been used in research to refer to the same or very similar notions. However, the term 'strategy' seems to have asserted itself in current literature as researchers have remained loyal to the pioneering work by Rubin (1975). Oxford (1990) explains that it would be useful to extend the definition by referring to learning strategies as "specific

actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p.8).

Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies distinguishes six strategy categories, namely: Memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. Memory strategies are about storage and retrieval of information. The examples of cognitive strategies are practicing, analyzing and deliberate reasoning. Compensation strategies "help learners to overcome knowledge limitations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 90). Metacognitive strategies are about self-reflecting on learning processes and decisions. Affective strategies are used for managing oscillations in emotions and motivation. Finally, social strategies are used for empathizing and cooperating with others.

Sternberg's triarchic theory of human intelligence (1985) is a very important reference point if it is assumed that learning strategies manifest as cognitive actions, operations, or decisions which shape learning behaviors. Sternberg's theoretical model describes how human intelligence functions; how mechanisms of learning, planning, monitoring, problem solving, decision making and implementing interrelate. Therefore, it provides a theoretical ground for interpreting the concept of learning strategies as deliberate self-employed acts whose aim is shaping both learning processes and outcomes.

Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences, "in which intelligence comprises multiple independent constructs", views the mind as "modular" (Sternberg and Sternberg, 2012, p.21). This theory allows interpreting learning strategies as personal mechanisms whose forms are determined by personal predispositions to use particular intelligences. Accordingly, variations in the frequency of applying learning strategies can be explained by personal tendencies to act (or not to act) in certain ways.

Both the interpretations are supported with the results reported in Karlak (2013). The author explores the interrelations between language learning strategies, motivation, and communicative competence of Croatian senior high-school students. She concludes that the integrative relationship between motivation, learning strategies, students' characteristics and learning context, both formal and extracurricular, creates a greater need and desire for communication, allowing greater linguistic contact which leads to greater communicative competence, greater motivation and higher self-efficacy as well as linguistic confidence.

If the utilization of language learning strategies is conditioned by personal and contextual characteristics, it is worth asking whether cultural elements also account for learners' preferences over specific strategy types. It appears that this question is not sufficiently explored. The conclusion is based on the inconsistent reports about the relationship between the frequency of language learning strategy utilization and the level of language proficiency. Interestingly, the studies conducted with different L1 populations report highly varied correlation coefficients.

For example, Oxford (1999) reviews several studies which report positive correlation between language learning strategies and language proficiency. As it can be concluded from her review, the SILL studies conducted with African, American, Japanese, Korean, Puerto Rican, and Turkish university-level students reveal generally weak ($r<.40$) and moderate ($.40<r<.70$) positive correlation coefficients.

Some other studies that investigated the relationship between language learning strategy and language proficiency scores report different results. The study conducted with Chinese university students (Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005) shows that language learning strategies are poor predictors of language proficiency. Another study that was conducted with Palestinian students reports the only difference in affective language learning strategy use between higher- and lower-

proficiency groups (Shmais, 2003). Huang (2009) explores the relationship between speaking skills and language learning strategies with one hundred and ninety Taiwanese college students (N=190). The author reports no significant difference between learners of high and low proficiency and their language strategy use, with the exception of cognitive strategies which distinguish the two groups.

These findings imply that the preferences over specific language learning strategies may indeed be depending on the learner's cultural background. The implication inspired some researchers to investigate the issue. For example, Deneme (2010) explores the language learning strategies of fifty-five Jordanian, Spanish and Turkish university students (N=55) studying English as a foreign language in their native countries. The author reports that "the Jordanian and the Turkish participants use memory strategies and affective strategies at a higher rate than the Spanish participants and the Jordanians show higher use of social strategies than the Turkish participants in order to learn English" (Deneme, 2010, p.81).

Based on the SILL scores of sixty-five students of Bosnian and Turkish linguistic and cultural backgrounds (N=65), Mulalić (2012) reports that the Bosnian students appear to apply language learning strategies more often than their Turkish peers. Both the groups are reported to apply compensation strategies more often than they apply other strategy clusters. Furthermore, both the groups are found to use affective strategies less frequently than they use other strategies.

The above presented findings need to be carefully interpreted since they are derived from the research attempts that included relatively low numbers of participants. Yet they show that the learners of one cultural background are likely to apply particular language learning strategies more and less often than their peers of another cultural background. This study will endeavor to confirm this assumption with a higher number of research participants.

3. Method

To test the assumption that undergraduate Turkish and Bosnian students learning English in Bosnia adopt different language learning strategies, two hundred and thirty-two (N=232) freshman students studying at International University of Sarajevo were surveyed with the SILL 7.0 (Oxford, 1990). The data was collected on several occasions during the Fall Semester 2015 using the original instrument after the author's consent was obtained. The data was analyzed using the SPSS software.

3.1. Participants

Two hundred and thirty-two (N=232) freshman undergraduate students participated in the study. One hundred and forty Bosnian (n=140) and ninety-two Turkish (n=92) students were surveyed. One hundred and thirteen female (n=113) and one hundred and nineteen male participants (n=119) provided the data. All the participants were found to be English proficient by the institutional language proficiency test.

3.2. Instrument

The instrument used in this study was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning-SILL 7.0 (Oxford, 1990). Fifty survey items are rated on a Likert-type scale (1=never or almost never true of me, 2=usually not true of me, 3=somewhat true of me, 4=usually true of me, 5=always or almost always true of me) and classified into six categories (see section 2.) A reliability analysis revealed the Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 (Kovacevic, 2016).

3.3. Data Analysis

The comparison of the strategies used by the Turkish and the Bosnian students learning English in Bosnia and Herzegovina was done utilizing the SPSS software. Visual inspection of

histograms, normal Q-Q plots and box plots showed that the language learning strategy scores approximated a normal distribution for both Turkish and Bosnian participants.

4. Findings

The results show that Turkish students use language learning strategies more often than Bosnian students. Secondly, the results indicate that cultural background plays an important role in the frequency of utilization of *memory*, *affective*, and *cognitive* strategies. Finally, the results show that the frequency of utilization of *compensation*, *metacognitive*, and *social* strategies is independent of cultural background.

Table 1: SILL means and standard deviations for the two student populations

Strategy Type	Nationality	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Memory	Bosnian	140	26.22	4.52	.38
	Turkish	92	29.92	4.36	.45
Cognitive	Bosnian	140	50.09	5.98	.50
	Turkish	92	48.36	5.07	.52
Compensation	Bosnian	140	20.25	3.82	.32
	Turkish	92	20.26	3.08	.32
Metacognitive	Bosnian	140	32.76	5.65	.47
	Turkish	92	32.41	4.79	.50
Affective	Bosnian	140	15.70	3.63	.30
	Turkish	92	18.90	2.91	.30
Social	Bosnian	140	21.26	3.69	.31
	Turkish	92	21.79	3.52	.36
Overall SILL	Bosnian	140	166.30	17.80	1.50
	Turkish	92	171.66	16.47	1.71

The Turkish students used *memory* strategies more often ($\overline{X}$=29.92, SD=4.36) than the Bosnian students ($\overline{X}$=26.22, SD = 4.52). The mean difference between the two groups was 3.70 with the 95% confidence interval for the estimated population mean difference being between 2.52 and 4.88. An independent t-test revealed statistically significant difference between the Bosnian and Turkish students' adoption of *memory* strategies ($t(230) = 6.19$; $p < 0.001$).

The Bosnian students used *cognitive* strategies more often ($\overline{X}$=50.09, SD=5.98) than the Turkish learners ($\overline{X}$=48.36, SD = 5.07). The mean difference between the two groups was 1.73; the 95% confidence interval for the estimated population mean difference was between 0.28 and 3.16. An independent t-test revealed statistically significant difference between the Bosnian and Turkish students' adoption of *cognitive* strategies ($t(215)=2.40$; $p=0.02$).

The Turkish students used *affective* strategies more often ($\overline{X}$=18.90, SD=2.91) than the Bosnian learners ($\overline{X}$=15.70, SD = 3.63). The mean difference between the two groups was 3.20; the 95% confidence interval for the estimated population mean difference was between 2.34 and 4.04. An independent t-test revealed statistically significant difference between the Bosnian and Turkish students' adoption of *affective* strategies ($t(221) = 7.38$; $p < 0.001$).

An independent t-test did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the two groups' adoption of *compensation* strategies ($t(220)=0.02$; $p>0.05$), *metacognitive* strategies ($t(215)=0.50$; $p>0.05$), and *social* strategies ($t(230)=1.10$; $p>0.05$) (see Table 1 for arithmetic means and standard deviations).

Overall, it was found that the Turkish students use the language learning strategies more often ($\overline{X}=171.66$, SD=16.47) than the Bosnian students ($\overline{X}=166.30$, SD=17.80). The mean difference between the two groups was 5.70 with the 95% confidence interval for the estimated population mean difference being between 0.79 and 9.93. An independent t-test revealed statistically significant difference between the Bosnian and Turkish students' adoption of the SILL strategies ($t(230) = 2.31$; $p=0.02$).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study are partly aligned with the study reported in Deneme (2010). Deneme (2010) found that the Turkish students used *memory* and *affective* strategies more frequently than the Spanish students. This study shows that the Turkish students also used *memory* and *affective* strategies more often than the Bosnian students. This is a significant finding which suggests that Turkish students adopt *memory* and *affective* strategies quite often as they strive for a rapid proficiency improvement during which they memorize linguistic items and cope with L2 performance anxiety. A comparison of the results reported in Tabanlioglu (2003) and the results reported in this study show that the Turkish students who learn English in Bosnia and Herzegovina use *memory*, *affective*, and *cognitive* strategies more often than their peers learning English in Turkey.

The reason is perhaps the fact that living and studying abroad creates new social capital more rapidly. Oscillations in emotions or motivation may be more frequent in that case. Naturally, the learner may look for alternative ways to control those oscillations. Therefore, relying on *affective* strategies is very likely for a self-reflective learner living and studying abroad. It needs to be noted that Sadeghi (2013) found a positive relationship between the intrinsic motivation and the use of *affective* strategies of Iranian students. Sadeghi's research on the correlations between language learning strategies and motivational orientations, which he carried out with one hundred and thirty-one Iranian university students (N=131) studying English as a foreign language, revealed that intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation affects adoption of language learning strategies.

The findings in this study are not aligned with the findings reported in Mulalic (2012). While Mulalic reports that Bosnian students use *cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective,* and *social* strategies more frequently than their Turkish peers, this study shows that Bosnian students only use *cognitive* strategies more often than their Turkish classmates. Overall, this study indicates that Turkish students rely on language learning strategies more frequently than the Bosnians. Although there are statistically significant differences in the frequency of using language learning strategies, the results show that both the populations make use of all the clusters of SILL strategies. The Bosnians seem to rely less on *memory* and *affective* strategies but still they occasionally apply them. On the other hand, there was no significant difference in the adoption of *compensation*, *metacognitive*, and *social* strategies.

A comparison of English language proficiency scores of the Turkish and the Bosnian study participants indicates that the Bosnian participants have higher English proficiency scores. It needs to be noted that both the populations were found proficient by the institutional language proficiency test. Yet if the difference in the proficiency scores is correct (it needs to be statistically verified), the results of this study indicate that *compensation*, *metacognitive*, and *social* strategies are adopted with the frequency which is independent of the proficiency level and the cultural

background. This is a significant finding which implies that EAP instructors may design effective instructional tasks disregarding learners' cultural background.

If the difference in the proficiency scores is further included into the analysis, the results of this study are aligned with the results reported by Shmais (2003) and Huang (2009) who found that high- and low-proficiency groups applied *affective* and *cognitive* strategies at different rates. Accordingly, it needs to be further explored whether the difference in the utilization of *affective* and *cognitive* strategies depends more on proficiency level than it depends on cultural background.

It needs to be recognized that the majority of English teachers mainly depend on the instructional material designed with the premise that "that all learners are essentially the same" (Dörnyei and Skehan (2003, p.593). The similarity of instructional tasks may be driving the learners towards similar learning behaviors. If cultural elements play a limited role in preferences over language learning strategies, the variability in the learners' preferences over specific learning tasks can only be partly attributed to the cultural background. As a result, the efficiency of the global English instructional material could be explained by its alignment with the needs of the contemporary English learner whose cultural background is an irrelevant element in the instructional design. This is a strong statement that may be seriously challenged by the learner-centered educational reasoning. However, the principles of English teaching methodology heavily rely on, as Kumaravadivelu (2012) puts it, "matters such as native-speaker accent, native-speaker teachers, native-like target competence, teaching methods emanating from Western universities, textbooks published by Western publishing houses, research agenda set by Center-based scholars, professional journals edited and published from Center countries" (p.15). Perhaps these imposed principles suppress the roles of various cultural elements that could additionally shape our English teaching practice.

The results of this study show that cultural background plays a limited role in the choice of language learning strategy type. Nevertheless, if the instructional material that often disregards particularities of L1 cultures was systematically tuned with learners' cultural backgrounds, the results would perhaps be different.

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