

Chapter 13

Social Strategy Use Among Omani Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on social strategy use among undergraduate students in one of Oman's private universities. It examines interactive strategy use in three main language-learning contexts: in class, on campus outside the classroom, and off campus. Data was collected through interviews and the online questionnaire social strategy inventory for language learning (SSILL). One-hundred twenty-four students enrolled in their second-year diploma program participated in the questionnaire, while 12 were interviewed and administered a mock IELTS exam. Results indicate that participants used all social strategies at only a moderate frequency. It is concluded that different language learning backgrounds, proficiencies, and power relations between students' L1 and English may impede the use of interactive strategies in spite of the supportive classroom environment. The chapter concludes by urging practitioners to pay closer attention to learner identities, power struggles, and group memberships in the English language classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Twentieth century language education practitioners and researchers in the Sultanate of Oman did not seem to have left any stone unturned to bring students' second language learning experiences as close as possible to their L1 learning environment. Curriculum designers, teacher trainers and the teachers themselves took a one hundred and eighty degree turn from the grammar translation methods that traditionally dominated instruction to communicative language teaching (CLT) resulting in an eclectic approach whereby learners' experiences are embedded in their sociocultural environment. A review of the ELT textbooks, the expected generic skills, and the recommended guidelines for teachers clearly show the importance given to interactive or social strategies. In this context, the learner's ability to use social strategies can play a determining role in empowering them, as educational institutions in Oman intend to equip students with negotiation skills and autonomy to take ownership of their learning.

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Sociocultural strategy (Oxford, 2011) use is not merely a tool that learners may choose to enhance their language proficiency today, but is one of the expected learner behaviors in academic contexts. Compared to some English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts – for example, India, where the English language is spoken by many sections of the upper middle and the elite classes as their first language and, therefore, its knowledge is taken for granted – in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, conscious efforts are made in classrooms and workplaces to create and establish situations where the English language can be learned. The impetus for this study arose from a curiosity to understand how effective and conducive these learning environments in well-equipped Omani classrooms are for students to use interactive strategies for learning purposes. Another goal was to study students' perceptions of social strategies in Middle Eastern countries that are increasingly becoming international business hubs where multiculturalism and multilingualism have become the norm.

Oman is a progressive country where the English language is officially promoted to enhance the optimal use of science and technology and foster international relationships. The government, with its rigorous and positive approaches and educational interventions, has successfully created both a love for the language in its people and classrooms where active learning policies are expected to be implemented by trained teachers. Within this context, this study investigates the extent to which Omani undergraduate students prefer, and also are able to deploy, social strategies to learn the English language. This was considered especially important as, within Oman as in many other EFL contexts, students are often exposed to implicit language learning strategy training to enhance their language skills.

Omani students generally enter the tertiary system with very limited English language proficiency. Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2012) have noted that Omani students' English language proficiency is below the threshold level to enter majors in science, business, and medicine. The placement tests run by the General Foundation programs across Oman confirm this claim. All the colleges and universities in Oman are required to run English foundation programs for 1-2 years for eligible students before they are enrolled in their English medium bachelor programs. Only those students who produce an overall 6 on the IELTS are exempt from this program, with very few students managing to achieve this. In most of the colleges and universities in the country, English language support is continued throughout degree programs through English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The social strategy use of language learners is a multi-faceted construct that involves psychological, social, linguistic, and communicative elements, and encompasses not only the communicative behavior of learners, but also the conduciveness of the environments in which they learn the English language. Over a period of two decades, language learning strategy (LLS) theory (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985) identified and categorized several techniques or strategies that ESL/EFL learners use in learning a second language. Since then, the theory has been constantly evolving through the addition of several dimensions, including cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective dimensions. In addition, Oxford (1990) separated social strategies from affective strategies and further divided these into three categories and six subcategories which were believed to powerfully aid learner sociolinguistic competence (see Figure 1).

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