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Toward Strategic EFL Learners: A Correlational Study Between Proficiency Level and Grammar Learning Strategies

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***Abstract*—Gaining competency in a foreign language is a challenging task, but learners can make progress in their language-learning endeavors by implementing suitable techniques and strategies when learning different language skills. With the aid of these strategies, students can improve their understanding and communicative application of different language skills effectively. Grammar learning strategies (GLSs) are a critical aspect of language learning, as they enable learners to refine the rules and practices of the target language. By investing in effective GLSs, foreign language learners can become more successful in the long run. Therefore, the present study aims to explore GLSs that Saudi EFL learners use and consider effective. To achieve this objective, the current study employed a mixed-method approach to examine a cohort of 102 Saudi EFL learners. These students were both high and low achievers. They were provided with an Arabic-translated version of Pawlak's (2018) Grammar Learning Strategy Inventory (GLSI). Collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The study concluded that high achievers employ a greater variety of grammar learning strategies compared to low achievers. The two groups agreed on prioritizing two types GLSs which are cognitive GLSs that enhance grammar comprehension and production and GLSs that address corrective feedback. However, they differed in the utilization of other types of strategies. This implies the need for further investigation of EFL low achievers to diagnose the drawbacks of their use of GLSs in order to fully take advantage of these strategies.**

***Index Terms*—English as a Foreign Language, grammar learning strategies, language learning strategies, proficiency level, strategic learning**

I. Introduction

Learning a foreign language can be a challenging task. However, using the right approach and strategies, learners can make progress. Among language learning strategies, grammar learning strategies (GLS) constitute a crucial aspect of language acquisition. They provide learners with the means to refine the principles and practices of the target language. These strategies, which fall under the umbrella of language learning strategies, encompass the conscious and intentional methods employed by language learners to augment their comprehension and production of grammatical structures. The development and customization of GLS can have a transformative impact on the proficiency and fluency of the target language (Cancino et al., 2022; Khatib & Ruhi Athar, 2015). Personalization of GLS is crucial, considering factors such as the learner's age, level of experience, and preferred learning styles. However, creating effective learning activities for grammar instruction requires constant motivation and pedagogical expertise (Refat et al., 2019). To effectively construct such activities, it is necessary to explore students' perceptions and experiences of GLS.

Despite the abundance of research conducted on language learning strategies used by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and their impact on acquiring the target language, there has been a noticeable dearth of studies examining grammar learning strategies (Pawlak, 2018). This research gap becomes particularly apparent in the context of EFL learners whose native language is Arabic. Consequently, the current study endeavors to make a contribution in this domain by addressing the following research inquiries:

1) Are there significant differences between Saudi EFL low and high achievers in their use of GLSs?
2) Drawing upon their trajectory in EFL learning, which GLS do Saudi EFL learners deem most effective?

The introductory section of this paper commences with a comprehensive survey of relevant literature. Subsequently, the methodology section delineates the characteristics of the participants, measurement instruments, and research protocols adopted in this study. Following this, the results derived from data analysis are presented. Finally, a discussion of the results is presented, and a recommendation is made.

II. Literature Review

A. Strategic Language Learning

Since the mid-seventies, Rubin (1975) noted the importance of learning strategies as techniques or devices that learners can use to gain knowledge. Oxford (1990) further espoused the notion that these strategies foster learner engagement in the language acquisition process, facilitating the encoding and retrieval of linguistic information. Expanding upon this discourse, Anderson (2005) showed a more generalized meaning, positing that learning strategies encompass intentional actions employed by learners to cultivate their language learning abilities. Research on LLS persisted until Oxford (2017) took the topic to the next level. She proposed that LLS may be used to help learners become more strategic language learners. After conducting a content-analytic study to provide an accepted definition for learning strategies, Oxford (2017) came to the conclusion that all definitions that either directly or indirectly referenced a mental or internal foundation “such as thoughts, cognitions, knowledge acquisition, learning in general, or specific mental learning processes" (p. 22). She agreed with the theory that learning techniques are treated by the mind as discrete pieces of information that begin in working memory and, with further processing, are stored in long-term memory.

Various scholars have studied the role of language learning methods in foreign language acquisition as they have been acknowledged as a key component in helping learners become more autonomous and efficient in their language studies (Abtew, 2021; Srisopha, 2022). Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that one of the biggest barriers to students starting their postsecondary education in foreign language acquisition is the lack of usage of learning strategies (Baybakova & Hasko, 2021). Moreover, by strengthening their capacity to learn and adjust to changing circumstances while taking responsibility for their own education, learners who were aware of and employ learning techniques could also benefit from an increase in autonomy, confidence, and general language competency (Srisopha, 2022).

B. Grammar Learning Strategies (GLS)

Oxford (2017) declared that grammar learning strategies in a second language are characterized as deliberate cognitive processes and actions that learners actively choose and apply within specific contexts. These strategies were revealed to enhance learners' self-regulated, autonomous development of second language grammar, thereby facilitating effective task performance and long-term efficiency (Dewantono & Murtisari, 2023).

According to Pawlak (2013), Grammar learning strategies (GLSs) have a distinct focus on acquiring and mastering grammatical structures within a language. GLSs aim to develop learner's ability to understand and use the grammar of a target language effectively. These strategies may include techniques for memorizing grammar rules, practicing grammatical structures, and applying grammar in communication. While grammar learning strategies are a distinct category within language learning strategies, they often interact with and complement other strategies, contributing to the overall development of language proficiency.

Recent research revealed that students who integrate grammar learning strategies into their language learning practices demonstrate enhanced proficiency in English grammar. This, in turn, leads to improved comprehension and production of the language. Zekrati (2017) found out that Iranian high school EFL learners use cognitive and social affective strategies with a positive relationship between strategy use and language achievement. Accordingly, Tılfarlıoğlu and Yalçın (2005) concluded that the use of grammar learning strategies positively impacts student achievement in English preparatory classes. Furthermore, these strategies also contribute to the retention and application of grammar rules, allowing learners to use them accurately and appropriately in real-life communication (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2023; Zhou, 2017).

However, it is worth noting that language learning strategies are not a one-size-fits-all approach. Individual learners may have different preferences and learning styles, so it is crucial for educators to provide a variety of strategies and resources that cater to the diverse needs of their students (Li, 2022).

C. Grammar Learning Strategies Inventory (GLSI)

Investigating language learning strategies poses a challenge due to the limited number of strategies that can be directly observed. In contrast, the majority of strategies can only be deduced or inferred from the observable behaviors exhibited by language learners (Griffith, 2003). The Grammar Learning Strategy Inventory is a tool developed by Pawlak (2013, 2018) to assess the strategies used by learners in acquiring English grammar in a second or foreign language. The Grammar Learning Strategy Inventory (GLSI) comprises four scales, each of which taps into a different type of grammar learning strategy. The GLSI contains statements about learning English grammar, and respondents are asked to rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates that this item does not apply at all to the student whereas 5 indicates that this item exactly captures the students' beliefs and behaviors. The four scales of the inventory include metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and social GLSs. The metacognitive scale measures planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's own learning of grammar. The cognitive scale measures the manipulation and organization of grammar rules and structures. The social affective scale measures interaction with others and managing emotions related to learning grammar. The social scale measures using grammar to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

III. METHODS

Following the mixed method approach, the present study examined the effect of proficiency level on Saudi EFL learners’ use of GLSs. For this purpose, the study explored the grammar learning strategies used by Saudi EFL high and

low achievers. Data were collected using a questionnaire and an interview to be analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

A. Participants

One hundred and two Saudi freshmen were randomly selected and voluntarily accepted to participate in the study. They were all from the Applied College at Majmaah University, KSA. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22. All the participants were administered an English proficiency placement test. Consequently, the participants were divided into 53 low achievers and 49 high achievers. The study took place during the fall semester of the academic year 2022 - 2023.

B. Research Instruments

Three instruments of measurement are used in the present study: The Applied College English placement test, Pawlak's (2018) Grammar Learning Strategy Inventory (GLSI), and focused group interviews. The college's English Proficiency placement test was used to distinguish students who excelled in English (high achievers) from those with a lower proficiency (low achievers). As the study aims to investigate the difference between the students with the two levels in using GLSs, Pawlak's (2018) Grammar Learning Strategy Inventory (GLSI) was employed. GLSI is based on the belief that grammar learning strategies are of four types: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. GLSI is composed of 70 items that cover the four strategy types. The cognitive strategies are subdivided into four categories: GLSs used to assist comprehension and production (referred to in the results of the present study as Cognitive_1), GLSs used to develop explicit knowledge of grammar (Cognitive_2), GLSs used to develop implicit knowledge (Cognitive_3) and GLSs that deal with corrective feedback (Cognitive_4).

This tool was verified to be highly valid and reliable by its designer in a recent study (Pawlak, 2018). The inventory was translated into Arabic and reviewed by two faculty members who are specialists in EFL. To ensure the reliability of GLSI in the Saudi context, the inventory was piloted before administering it in the present study and appeared highly reliable ($\propto$=.96). Participants are asked to rate each item based on a 5-point Likert scale.

C. Research Procedures

After classifying participants based on their English proficiency levels, GLSI was administered. The students were asked not to reply to the inventory until they listened to a 15-minute orientation in which the researcher explained the nature of the questions, what they assess, and what the five-point Likert scale means. After responding to the questionnaire, a random group of high achievers (n=15) were invited to join semi-structured interviews. During the interview, subjects were prompted to recall a situation in which they had to study an English grammar rule for a serious purpose and the outcome was a success. The interviewees were asked to write down their stories explaining the techniques they followed to understand and remember the rule. The interviews were transcribed for further analysis.

IV. Data Analysis and Results

In the following two subsections, data collected in the present study were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, each in order, to provide answers to the two research questions.

A. Quantitative Results

Using SPSS, descriptive and inferential statistical tests were applied to analyze the collected data quantitatively to answer the first research question: Are there significant differences between Saudi EFL low and high achievers in their use of GLSs?

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for High Achievers' Means in the GLSI

GLS Type	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Cognitive_1	49	4.2345	.47077
Cognitive_4	49	4.1839	.65970
Social	49	3.9862	.91641
Cognitive_3	49	3.9103	.77245
Metacognitive	49	3.8405	.63816
Cognitive_2	49	3.6810	.53246
Affective	49	3.6502	.83525
All GLSs	49	3.8729	.49884

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Low Achievers' Means in the GLSI

GLS Type	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Cognitive_1	53	3.4530	.70006
Cognitive_4	53	3.2329	.91403
Affective	53	3.0685	.86278
Metacognitive	53	3.0577	.82963
Social	53	3.0411	.87810
Cognitive_2	53	3.0063	.70965
Cognitive_3	53	2.9164	.86362
All GLSs	53	3.0912	.66667

Based on the data presented in Tables 1 and 2, the results of the descriptive analysis suggested that the overall use of grammar learning strategies by high achievers was high (M= 3.78). However, low achievers displayed moderate use of GLSs as their total mean was M=3.09. When examining each type of GLSs in detail, results revealed that there is a similarity between the two groups in the results. Both high achievers and low achievers use the same two types of cognitive strategies most frequently. They are GLSs that assist grammar comprehension and production (Cognitive_1)

and GLSs used to deal with corrective feedback on grammatical errors (Cognitive_4) as their mean score were M=4.23 and M=4.18 for high achievers and M=3.45 and M=3.23 for low achievers respectively.

Concerning the other types of GLSs, the two groups were similar in the absence of statistically significant differences between GLS types within each group. However, higher achievers showed high frequency in using all GLSs, while low achievers displayed moderate use. Starting from the third most commonly used GLSs to the least ones, high achievers use the social strategies in third place (M=3.98), followed by the cognitive strategies for implicit knowledge (M=3.91), then, metacognitive strategies (M=3.84). The least frequently used strategies were the cognitive strategies for explicit knowledge (M=3.68) and the affective strategies (M=3.65). On the other hand, low achievers revealed them in a different descending order. They mostly used affective GLSs followed by metacognitive, social, GLSs used to develop explicit knowledge then GLSs used to develop implicit knowledge as their means were M=3.07, 3.06, 3.04, 3.01, and 2. 91 respectively.

TABLE 3
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLE T-TEST OF THE PARTICIPANTS' SCORES IN THE GLSI

GLS Type	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
Cognitive_3	.000	-.99391-	.18418	-1.35932-
Cognitive_4	.000	-.95103-	.18669	-1.32142-
Social	.000	-.94511-	.19514	-1.33226-
Metacognitive	.000	-.78279-	.17138	-1.12280-
Cognitive_1	.000	-.78151-	.14139	-1.06203-
Cognitive_2	.000	-.67476-	.14593	-.96427-
Affective	.000	-.58175-	.18771	-.95417-
All GLSs	.000	-.78167-	.13702	-1.05352-

To compare the performance of the two groups that participated in the present study, an independent t-test was used. As displayed in Table 3, results revealed that the significance level (Sig. 2-tailed) for all GLS is reported as 0.000, indicating that the observed mean differences are statistically significant. The negative values in the mean difference column indicate that high achievers tend to utilize these strategies more frequently than low achievers. For each strategy type, the difference in mean between the two groups was the largest when using the cognitive GLSs for implicit knowledge (M=0.99), then GLSs used to deal with corrective feedback on grammatical errors (M=0.95) then social strategies (M=0.94). On the other hand, the mean difference between the other types of GLSs ranged from M=0.78 to M=0.58, in the case of the affective GLSs.

B. Qualitative Results

The interview transcripts of 15 students were analyzed using thematic content analysis (TCA) as it is one of the most common ways to analyze interviews qualitatively. Anderson (2007) described it as "the most foundational of qualitative analytic procedures and in some way informs all qualitative methods" (p. 1). TCA conducted in the present study followed Vaismoradi et al.'s (2016) stages of theme development which consist of four phases: initialization, construction, rectification, and finalization. As a result of the analysis, eight themes were drawn from participants' responses as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
RESULTS OF THE PARTICIPANTS' INTERVIEW ON THE MOST EFFECTIVE GLSS

Themes in students' experiences	GLS Type	Percentage of Use
1. Use grammatical rules in everyday situations	Cognitive_1	46.7%
2. Tell stories		
3. Use internet resources (YouTube or Google search) to help understand the rules		
4. Use mobile applications to practice the rule and receive feedback	Cognitive_4	40%
5. Teach the rule to peers	Social	33.3%
6. Organize the grammatical rule in a table	Cognitive_2	26.7%
7. Memorize the rule by repetition		
8. Translate the rules into Arabic		

When asked to recall the most effective strategies they followed to study a difficult grammatical rule, most of the participants (46.7%) agreed that practicing the rule in real sentences helped them understand and remember that rule. They reported using them in everyday situations either orally or in written forms. One of the participants replied, *"I used to tell stories using the tenses so that I do not forget them".* Another student confirmed, *"When I study a*

grammatical rule I make sure to use it too much in my everyday speech". A third responded, *"I search for examples on the Internet to help me understand better".* The second most reported GLSs (40%) were concerned with corrected feedback. Here are some examples of the students' responses:

> *"A good method that helped me a lot is watching a YouTube video with the wrong sentence being corrected. I watch it several times."*
> *"I prefer using apps like Duolingo which showed me my score and mistakes in each level of the game."*
> *"I remember when I got a problem with grammar, I started to use an application that presents tests to several proficiency levels after explaining the rule."*

On *the* other hand, the least reported GLSs were the social strategies and GLS used to develop explicit knowledge of grammar. Thirty-three percent of the interviewees confirmed using social strategies such as studying with other students or teaching the rules to their colleagues. They reported it as an effective strategy to preserve and retain the grammatical rules. In addition, the smallest percentage of students (27%) reported that using GLSs used to develop explicit knowledge of grammatical rules. They summarize the grammatical rules in tables and add examples. One of the participants replied, *"My teacher asked me to make a summary of all the rules that I have studied in the course, so I drew a table and divided it into the name of the rule the structure, and an example then it became a reference to all my siblings."* Another student confirmed, *"I collect all the similar rules in one table then I put my own examples."* Interestingly, only one interviewee referred to using Arabic translation when studying grammar.

V. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the differences in the use of grammar learning strategies between low achievers and high achievers in English language learning. The purpose of the study is to provide answers to two research questions: 1) Are there significant differences between Saudi EFL low and high achievers in their use of GLSs? 2) Drawing upon their trajectory in EFL learning, which GLS do Saudi EFL learners deem most effective?

The results of the descriptive analysis indicate that overall, high achievers demonstrate a high level of utilization of grammar learning strategies (GLSs), whereas low achievers exhibit a moderate level of GLSs usage. However, when examining each type of GLSs in detail, results revealed that both high and low achievers tend to employ two particular types of cognitive strategies most frequently. These strategies are cognitive GLSs that aid in grammar comprehension and production and GLSs that deal with corrective feedback of grammatical errors. Concurring with this conclusion, Zekrati (2017) examined Iranian high school EFL learners' use of cognitive and social affective strategies and concluded that there is a positive relationship between strategy use and language achievement. Moreover, recent research confirmed the crucial role that cognitive strategies play in helping students understand and effectively learn grammar (Wardani et al., 2023; Ghannam, 2019). Such confirmation of the importance of cognitive strategies in grammar learning encourages the implementation of cognitive-thinking assisting tools, such as mind mapping, which proved their effectiveness in various language skills including grammar (Bataineh & Al-Majali, 2023).

Concerning GLSs that address corrective feedback, TCA for interview scripts provided intriguing results. Most of the interviewees reported using websites or mobile applications to help them understand and practice grammatical rules that are difficult for them. They prefer online platforms as they offer instant feedback on grammar mistakes, allowing students to swiftly identify and rectify their errors. In general, corrective feedback was proclaimed to have a substantial effect on EFL grammar learning. Hashemifardnia et al. (2019) investigated the effectiveness of giving grade, corrective feedback, and a combination of both on Iranian pre-intermediate EFL students' learning tenses. The study concluded that providing feedback along with grades significantly impacted grammar learning. Similar results that acknowledge the impact of corrective feedback were verified (Basturkmen & Fu, 2021; Daneshvar & Rahimi, 2014; Giacon, 2022).

Using these two types of GLSs simultaneously is not unexpected because the contexts in which EFL learners employ these strategies are quite similar (Pawlak, 2018, p. 369). What is surprising is the finding that there is a similarity in the pattern of strategy usage between the two groups. However, the inferential statistical analysis revealed significant differences between the two groups in the frequency of usage. This result may be justified by the difference in their habits (Looyeh et al., 2017; Sasi & AnjuA, 2020; Sharma, 2017; Siahi & Maiyo, 2015). Another possible interpretation is the variance between high and low achievers in their self-regulation skills (Difrancesca et al., 2016; Morales, 2021; Teng & Zhang, 2022). This implies the need for further investigation of EFL low achievers to diagnose the drawbacks of their use of these particular strategies in order to fully take advantage of them.

When considering the other types of GLS, the results show notable differences between the two participant groups. High achievers appear to demonstrate a higher frequency of use for a wider range of GLS types. However, it is important to note that the standard deviations also vary across the scales, which suggests some degree of variability within each achievement level. This variability may indicate individual differences or other contextual factors that influence the relationship between proficiency level in English as a foreign language and the use of GLS. This result coincides with Li (2022) who came to the conclusion that EFL learners' individual differences such as their desire to learn, motivation, and willingness to communicate, positively impact their use of grammar learning strategies. Similar findings were achieved by Mohamed Salleh et al. (2020) who conducted their study on Malay-English bilingual primary school children. They concluded that there are individual differences between bilingual children in grammar learning.

These differences are affected by various factors such as language aptitude, environmental influences, and developmental stages of grammar acquisition.

Notably, higher achievers tend to employ social, cognitive (enhance implicit knowledge), and metacognitive GLSs more than cognitive (enhance explicit knowledge) and affective GLSs. On the other hand, low achievers are inclined to use affective, metacognitive and social GLSs over cognitive GLSs that enhance both explicit and implicit knowledge of grammar. These findings do not fully comply with Taheri et al. (2020) who concluded that Iranian EFL high achievers prefer to use compensation, affective, and cognitive strategies, while low achievers favor social, metacognitive, and memory strategies.

The results of the interview confirmed the conclusions drawn from the quantitative analyses. Nevertheless, the high achievers interviewed did not report some crucial GLSs such as strategies that develop implicit knowledge, and metacognitive strategies. For implicit knowledge strategies, a logical interpretation may be due to the nature of implicit knowledge as information that is acquired and utilized without conscious awareness but can be identified through actions (Dienes & Perner, 2002; Rebuschat & Williams, 2013). However, when metacognitive strategies are discussed, the case is not the same. Metacognitive strategies encompass implicit and explicit processes (Frith, 2012; Sun & Mathews, 2003), therefore, explicit metacognitive processes were expected to be reported. In addition to the previously mentioned types, affective GLSs were not revealed in the interviewees' responses. Overall, the findings of the present research implied the need for further thorough investigation to provide satisfying explanations.

VI. Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the differences in the use of grammar learning strategies between low achievers and high achievers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed statistically significant mean differences across all scales of measurement, indicating that high achievers employed a greater variety of grammar learning strategies compared to low achievers. The observed differences in mean scores across achievement levels highlight potential connections between academic achievement and these variables. However, additional research is needed to deepen our understanding of these relationships and to explore potential underlying mechanisms.

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