

# **Learning Strategies Role in Developing Autonomous EFL Students**

## **Abstract**

The current study investigated the learning strategies that non-native English majors used in their pursuit of learning English as a foreign language. In particular, the present study aimed at finding the metacognitive learning strategies, cognitive learning strategies, affective learning strategies and socio-interactive learning strategies and tactics that 4<sup>th</sup> year English major university students used to help them become autonomous learners. A sample of 40 participants were chosen randomly to participate in the study from a population of 100 students. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the study data. The thematic analysis qualitative method was used to analyze the collected data. Results showed that the participants in the study do use a myriad of learning strategies. However, their use needs major improvement. Further, they are not aware of several effective learning strategies that they could tremendously benefit from. The authors present some pedagogical and classroom implications that could assist learners in improving their English proficiency and become autonomous learners.

**Key words:** Learning strategies; TEFL, Strategies Training, Autonomous Learning

## **Introduction**

Learners' thoughts and actions (learning strategies) according to Purpura (2014) are of paramount significance when learning a foreign or a second language. Teachers who are aware of the strategies that their learners use are expected to assist their students how to notice and understand new target language input. Learners who are aware of effective learning strategies might be able understand and control the challenges that they face in the process of learning a foreign or a second language. Further, being aware and conscious of the learning strategies that they use learners could regulate their thoughts, actions and affect intentionally. There is no doubt that some English language learners use some learning strategies unconsciously without being aware of them. Researchers call this "automatic processing". This made some researchers such as (Papies & Aarts, 2011) argue that being

conscious of ones learning strategies is not necessary and not required for English Language Learners (ELLs) to regulate their actions.

This might be true for successful ELL learners. However, in case of the Palestinian learners, as the authors observed, who spend many years learning English but unable to communicate in English effectively one's wonder about the learning strategies that they use consciously or unconsciously in the process of learning English. To assist them the authors believe it is critical to know the strategies that they use and how they use them. According to Purpura (1999), strategic competence in learning a foreign or second language could be used to refer to the learning strategies that are used consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and automatically while foreign or second language learners are learning the target language.

Palestinian EFL learners and English as foreign language teachers could tremendously benefit from identifying the learning strategies that the learners already use if any. This could assist teachers in training their students to improve the strategies that they already use, make them aware of new ones and train them to use such strategies. Thus, the current study will be a critical study in providing insightful evidence –based recommendations for English as a foreign language teachers and learners particularly in the Palestinian education context, the Arab education context and any international similar education contexts.

### **Research Problem:**

English is one of the main foreign languages taught in Palestine. Students begin learning English at age six in grade one. They spend twelve years learning English at

schools before they join university. Some of these students choose to major in English at the university level. In spite of this, Palestinian students still do not have a high level of English proficiency. It is of paramount significance to conduct a study investigating the learning strategies that learners use in the process of learning English as a foreign language. It is vital to identify such learning strategies and to what extent there are effective. This will allow for finding the reasons behind the mediocre proficiency that learners have even after learning English for a long time. Thus, the current study raised some significant research questions pertaining to the metacognitive, cognitive, affective and socio-interactive learning strategies that learners use in learning English as a foreign language.

### **Research Questions**

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the memory learning strategies and tactics that 4<sup>th</sup> year English major university students use to help them become autonomous learners?
- (2) What are the cognitive learning strategies and tactics that 4<sup>th</sup> year English major university students use to help them become autonomous learners?
- (3) What are the compensation learning strategies and tactics that 4<sup>th</sup> year English major university students use to help them become autonomous learners?
- (4) What are the metacognitive learning strategies and tactics that 4<sup>th</sup> year English major university students use to help them become autonomous learners?
- (5) What are the affective learning strategies and tactics that 4<sup>th</sup> year English major university students use to help them become autonomous learners?
- (6) What are the social strategies learning strategies and tactics that 4<sup>th</sup> year English major university students use to help them become autonomous learners?

## **Theoretical Framework:**

Interest in foreign language learning strategies began in the 1970s with research focusing on the characteristics of the “good language learner” (Rubin, 1975, p. 43). Researchers tried to understand what successful foreign language learners do in contrast to unsuccessful language learners. They believe that this could assist us in better understanding the process of foreign language learning. The focus was on identifying effective language learning strategies. The goal is to establish a link between learning success and strategy use.

A number of characteristics and strategies identified by Rubin (1975) that good language learners use to achieve success. First, they are willing and accurate guessers. Second, they are highly motivated to communicate in the target language. Third, they are willing to make mistakes and appear foolish. Fourth, they are continuously searching for patterns in the language while focusing on form and communication. Fifth, they use any opportunity that arises to practice the language. Sixth, they monitor their learning progress and constantly focus on their learning goals. Seventh, they focus on the meaning by paying attention to the form, underlying meaning and the context. Such learners' attributes and learning strategies are significant for learning a foreign or a second language.

The significance of strategic competence in learning a foreign or a second language encouraged some researchers such as Oxford (1990), and O’Malley and Chamot (1990) to conceptualize this concept in second and foreign language learning and use. Oxford (1990) conceptualized strategy use in terms of direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies. In

direct strategies, include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. She used her conceptualization as a basis for developing her widely used Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL). O' Malley and Chamot (1999) conceptualized strategy use in terms of cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social / affective strategies.

Influenced by several leaning theories particularly (Vygotsky, 1978) Oxford (2011) proposed a new model of strategic competence. Her new model focuses on how foreign / second language learners use strategies to regulate their language learning behavior. The new model is composed of three metastrategies that control the behavioral learning strategies that learners use in the process of learning. These metastategies are: 1) metacognitive strategies that help the learner to manage the cognitive dimension such as reasoning; 2) meta-affective strategies that help the leaner to manage the affective dimension such as motivation, attitude and emotions; 3) meta-sociocultural interactive strategies that help learners control the sociocultural interactive dimension such as handling communicative deficiencies. For the current study, the researchers used Oxford's (1990) strategy taxonomy because of its simplicity and clarity. In brief, Oxford's (1990) strategy taxonomy is composed of direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies consist of metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Examples of all strategies are provided in the results section in Figures 2 – 7).

### **Literature Review:**

EFL teachers should train their students to use the aforementioned strategies in order to enhance their foreign / second language learning and autonomy. They could

integrate or impeded strategy training in the process of teaching the target language. According to Cohen & Weaver (1998) language learners who are aware of learning strategies and how and when to use them during language learning and use become more capable and good language learners. In assisting learners becoming aware of such strategies and training them to use them, language teachers need to take into consideration five major components. These are discussing strategies learners already use, presenting new strategies, modeling strategies, explaining when and why strategies can be used as well as providing extensive practice using authentic opportunities for students to discuss applications and effectiveness of the strategies (Benson, 2001).

One of the main benefits of training foreign language learners using the learning strategies mentioned above is that they enhance learners ability to become autonomous learners. For instance, Hakan and others (2015) concluded that learning strategies play a vital role in enhancing autonomy among second / foreign language learners. Ungureanu and Georgescu (2012) found out that it is critical that teachers are aware of the foreign language learning strategies. Further, it is vital to make learners aware of these strategies and using them effectively. Such awareness and training helps learners improve their language skills and becoming autonomous.

Students' level in English is an important variable to keep in mind when training students to use the English language learning strategies. For instance, Kashefian & Maarof (2016), Nazri et al (2016), Lee and Heinz (2016) Uslu (2016) and Vibulphol (2016) found out non-native English learners use of learning strategies varies based on their English level and motivation. As they advanced in their language levels, they use more strategies to enhance their learning. Thus, identifying at an early stage the strategies that learners use

and specifying those that they need help learning to use will definitely help them improve their learning and autonomy. One of the current study aims is to find the strategies that the Palestinian English learners employ in their learning.

English language learning strategies use assists in creating successful teaching and learning environment. Learners who use effective learning strategies tend to be engaged in the learning process employing various learning strategies. They also improve their autonomous learning activities and autonomous levels (Zhao & Qin, 2017). Capitalizing on learners needs, learning styles, and belief in the importance of learning strategies in learning English play an important role in encouraging and improving learners use of the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and socio-cultural strategies (Sadehgi et al 2014; Balci, 2017, and Dahlberg, 2016)).

Recent research focused on how peers learn from each other language learning strategies through cooperative learning. For instance, Likitrattanaporn (2018) found out students showed positive attitudes towards cooperative learning that allowed them to exchange learning strategies they used in learning English. It has also been found that learning strategy use affect positively learners' achievement (Balci & Üğüten12018). Further, in particular, Magyar (2018) found out metacognitive and memory learning strategies had a positive effect on school achievement and foreign language attainment. She also found, there was a strong impact on children's attitudes. Further, Tanjung (2018) concluded it is vital that instructors imbed teaching learning strategies in their daily English lessons.

Further, Learning strategies and self-regulation were compared and discussed. For instance, Takeuchi (2019) argued against discarding learning strategies and replacing them with self-regulation. He recommended developing a theoretical framework that encompassing learning strategies and self-regulation. He continues to argue that they complement each other. In addition, Salvadores (2019) emphasizes the significance of conducting strategy training for both researchers and teachers so that all those who are interested in the issue know them. In addition, based on the positive results she found, Salvadores strongly recommends training teachers on language learning strategies. Training all English teachers at all levels and across students' ages according to Nhem (2019) is imperative as he found that there is no significant statistical difference between young and adolescent learners in using cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies.

### **Methodology:**

#### **Research Design**

This is a qualitative research study. Data collected were analyzed using the qualitative thematic analysis method (Braun, and Clarke, 2006). The study was conducted in the spring of 2016 -2017 school year. The sample of the study consisted of 30 4<sup>th</sup> year non-native English majors students chosen randomly from a population of 100 students at Birzeit University in Palestine. All participants were in their final year at the University. They have been studying English for 4 years. All the participants in the study were female students. It is a coincident that all of them are females.

## **Instruments and Materials**

The current study used the semi-structured interview instrument for data collection. The researcher interviewed 30 participants individually. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews with the participants focused on their autonomous learning strategies. The researcher with the participants' consent recorded each interview. Later all interviews were transcribed resulting in a huge amount of data. The interviews were guided by a list of interview questions developed in advance. The questions in the study instrument focused on eight activities. These include the strategies that learners use:

- to motivate themselves
- to deal with their feelings
- to plan their learning
- to support their learning
- to complete the tasks of learning
- to monitor their learning
- to evaluate their learning progress
- use in cooperating with others to enhance and improve their learning

To ensure the validity of the interview questions, all the questions used in the semi-structured interview were cross-validated, against the research study questions and the purpose of the study. This confirmed that all the interview questions were relevant, new ones were added when necessary and unneeded ones were eliminated. In addition, three experts in the field reviewed the interview questions to strengthen the validity of the instrument. Further, the researchers took the data collected through the interviews

back to the participants for verification (respondent validation) to confirm the validity of the data collected through the interview instrument

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data. The systematic analysis has followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. . In the first phase, which is known as the reduction phase, the researchers read and reread the data collected making themselves more familiar with the content. In the second phase, the initial coding stage, the researchers read the data repeatedly for finding consistencies or differences regarding some codes. In this phase, statements that might serve as potential quotes supporting the themes reported by the participants were marked. In the third phase, the researchers begin code analysis and developing the codes into meaningful themes. In the fourth phase, the researchers revised the themes seeking coherence and refining them in relation to the authentic text. This assisted in excluding themes that do not contribute to the research questions raised. In the fifth phase, the researchers write the full meaningful themes by naming the themes and supporting every theme with the necessary narrative details. In the sixth and final phase, the researchers present the final themes supported with necessary evidence and examples. In the next paragraph, the researchers will explain how the aforementioned six phases used to analyse the data of the current study.

In the first phase, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data. Transcribing the recorded data allowed the researchers to become very familiar with the data. In the second phase of the data analysis, a number of initial codes were identified. Codes were generated manually around particular questions in mind. In the third phase, codes were classified and sorted in initial themes. In the fourth phase, the researcher

reviewed the initial identified themes resulting in some deletion and addition of new themes. After a thorough and detailed review of the themes, the researchers ended with a list of themes that focused on answering the research questions. In the fifth phase, themes were reviewed repeatedly in order to give them suitable names according to their specifications and characteristics. After naming themes and sub-themes it became possible to create good, clear themes which made it possible to look at the data critically and to start discussing the results. In the last phase, the researcher presented the results of the study in a coherent and organized manner that assisted in answering the research questions of the study.

## Results

Using Oxford's (1990) learning strategies taxonomy, the participants' responses pertaining to the strategies that they use in the process of learning English as a foreign language could be categorized into memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. (See Figure 1)

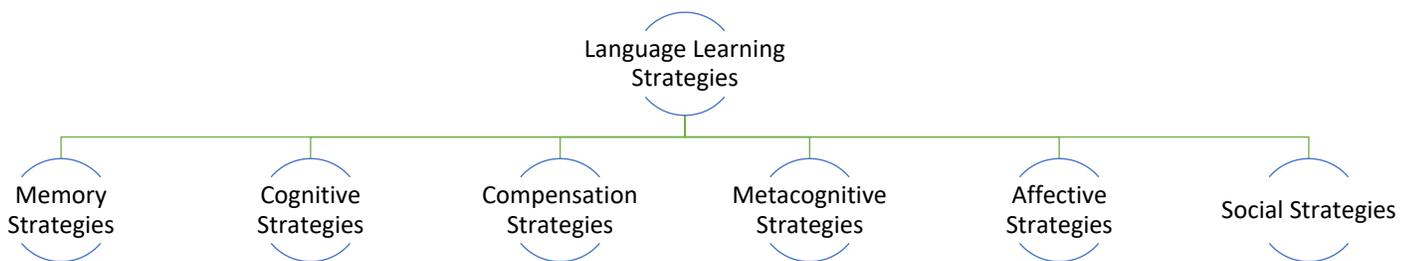


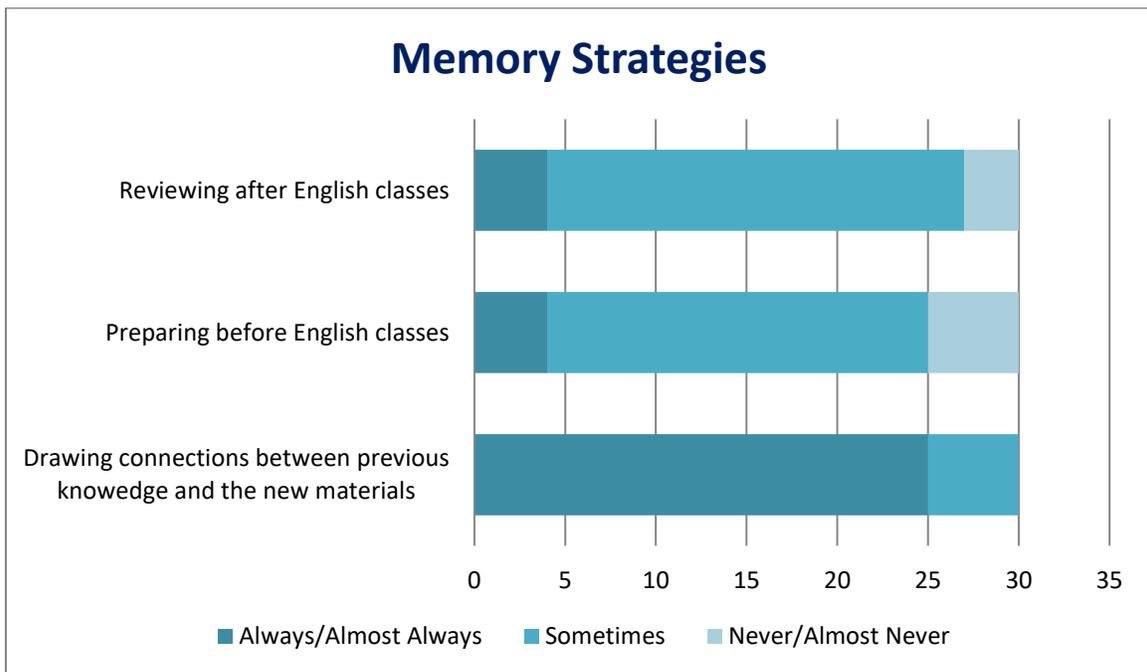
Figure 1: Language Learning Strategies

In the following sections, a detailed description of the aforementioned language learning strategies will be provided as reported by the participants. It is worth

mentioning here that in the interviews some students spoke in Arabic and others in English and sometimes both in English and Arabic. In transcribing and translating the data. The authors fixed all grammatical and lexical mistakes committed by students. This is the reason the quotations used below to provide evidence of the strategies used by students are error-free.

## Memory Strategies

**Figure 2: Memory Strategies**



**Frequency of Using Memory Strategies**

### *Reviewing after English Classes*

Two participants said they review every day. “I always do that! When I go home I transcribe the notes I recorded during the lesson... so I review every day!” one of the participants said. Half of the participants said they only review before exams. ” I

*understand well and focus during the lessons... I only need to read and revise my notes before the exams”* in the words of one of the students. Others confirmed that they sometimes review after classes especially in the weekends. They also reported that they review when they did not understand the lesson. One of them stated:

I review after English classes when I feel I did not understand well...  
I read my notes... I use the internet to understand... and sometimes  
I ask the teacher to explain”.

### *Preparing before English Classes*

About ten of the participants said they prepare for literature classes more than linguistics classes. Some of them affirmed that in linguistics classes, teachers keep lecturing and providing information all the time. They meant that there is no need to prepare for linguistics classes because they are very passive in such classes and that teachers do it all. One of the students stated

I mostly prepare for drama classes. Actually, I prepare for literature classes more than linguistics classes. In literature classes, we analyze literary texts so we need to read the text and understand it in order to be able to participate and ready for questions.” In linguistics classes, we usually memorize information... teachers lecture all the time.

Other participants said that they prepare for literature classes because teachers ask them to prepare and give them quizzes. *“I prepare for literature classes because they ask us to prepare... and sometimes they give us quizzes”* in the words of one of the participants. Some of them keen to prepare before literature classes in order to be able to participate effectively.

Four participants said they prepare for linguistics classes more than literature classes. They prepare because they “love” linguistics or because they need to listen to the teacher and understand the subject being explained. One of those participants stated:

I prepare for linguistics classes... It is impossible to understand what the teachers say without preparing before the class”.

Three participants said they prepare for both literature and linguistics classes. They believe preparing before classes help them participate effectively and answer teachers’ questions. One of the participants said:

I prepare for both literature and linguistics classes. We all need to prepare before the classes in order to participate and be active and effective. For example, before literature classes I read the text, let us say a play, I try to analyze it... I read analysis on some websites... Sometimes I watch videos on YouTube. I do everything to understand the text and to be ready for any question from the teacher.

#### *Drawing Connections between Previous Knowledge & New Material*

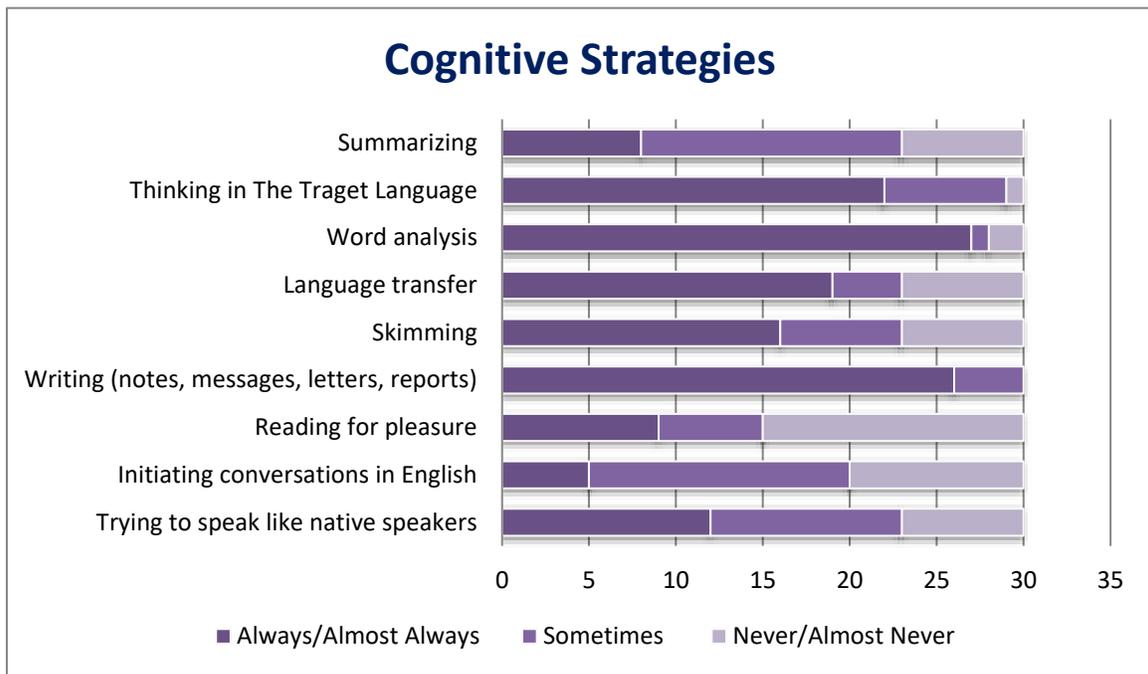
Eighty percent of the participants said they draw connections and make relationships between what they already know and what they learn. They try to build the new knowledge they learn on what they have learned in the past. They reported about the way they improved their English skills and the difference between learning English at school and at university. One of the participants said

For example... At school, they taught us that there are five components of a story... the characters, the plot, the setting and ... mmm... What else? The conflict and the ... resolution. However, I never really understood what these elements mean until I came to university. Now I can analyze stories, plays, novels and even poems.

Forty percent of them said they consider knowledge “cumulative” and an “information network”. Others agreed it is impossible to learn without the previous knowledge.

It is impossible to learn without the previous knowledge... it is like a building...each stone is built on the other. I do that ALWAYS! I do it automatically... I draw relationships between what I already know and what I learn. Writing is the best example. In 141 and 231 we learn how to paraphrase... summarize... write reports and shorts essay... and now we write descriptive, narrative, persuasive and other kinds of essays. We need to first learn the basics... and then build on them.

## Cognitive Strategies



**Figure 3: Frequency of Cognitive Strategy Use**

### *Summarizing*

Summarizing is another strategy that students use during studying English. They reported that they make summaries before exams “*I summarize chapters included in the exam... I can’t memorize the whole book*” in the words of one of them. Others summarize after reading a novel. “*When I finish reading a novel I usually summarize it*” or when teachers asked them to do so.

### *Thinking in the Target Language*

Many participants stated that they try to think in English. One of them stated:

I try to think in English... because when we think in Arabic and speak or write in English the speech or the text becomes weak... and when someone reads a text written by you... he or she can tell that you think in Arabic and translate... so I always try to avoid translation.

Another student said “*Well... I try to think in English... It was hard for me to think in English... I practiced a lot... and now I can think in English... It takes more time when you think in English... but its better*”.

### *Word analysis*

Eighty Five of the participants confirmed that they find the meaning of English words by dividing them into prefixes, suffixes and stems that they understand. “*I omit the prefixes and the suffixes... I try to guess the meaning from the stem*” as one of the interviewees stated. Only two participants said they do not divide words into parts they understand.

### *Language transfer*

Ninety percent of the participants said they look for words in Arabic that are similar to new words in English. One of them stated “*Yes! This helps me memorize the new words*”. Eight students reported they do not do so because Arabic and English are not similar languages. “*... There is a huge difference between Arabic and English... they have different structures... Arabic and Hebrew... are Semitic languages ... they are so similar*” in the words of one of the students.

### *Skimming*

Forty five percent of the participants reported that it depends on the text itself. When they read a passage in an exam, they do not skim. They read in details immediately. However, when they read an article or look for information for a research, for example, they tend to skim. One of the participants said, *“I do skim-read the text. However, some texts are so difficult... especially political texts... I have read reports about the situation in Gaza... there were so difficult terms... I could not skim... I have read the reports line by line”*. Another participant stated, *“I skim when I read an essay... but I don't, for example, skim in exams... I don't skim essays in exams”*. Others said they skim to decide whether to continue reading a certain text or not and when they feel bored. I: *“I don't skim! I read carefully from the beginning... when I feel bored... I skim the rest of the text”*. Five participants said they do not skim. They read immediately line by line. One of them reported, *“I don't skim... I read immediately... without skimming”*.

### *Writing (Notes, Messages, Letters, Reports)*

Eighty percent of the participants reported they write notes, messages, letters and reports in English. They take notes during lessons and mostly write essays and reports especially when teachers ask them to. One of the participants said: *“Yes, I do! I try to write in English as much as I could... because... when I write more I improve more and more”*.

Another student stated

I chat with my colleagues in English... I also write notes in English.  
Teachers ask us to write reports and essays... but there is no creativity...  
because they choose the subject and sometimes the resources, we need  
to use.

### *Reading for Pleasure*

About ten participants said they usually read for pleasure. They read novels, stories, online articles and historical books. One of them said she reads books and novels with simple language.

The language of some books is very high... I feel depressed...  
I do not finish reading them! I read books and novels with simple  
language. I read reports about health and daily life ....

Many other students (about eleven) admitted they do not read for pleasure for a number of reasons:

- (a) Lack of time
- (b) Getting bored fast
- (c) They don't like reading
- (d) They prefer reading summaries of novels and stories.
- (e) They prefer reading in Arabic.

One of the participants stated:

I try to read for pleasure... but sometimes I don't... especially when the book is boring! I prefer to read summaries... not full books! I read more in Arabic... I LOVE political books... I read about prisons and prisoners. I love politics more than literature... more than romantic and classical texts.

### *Initiating Conversations in English*

Seventy-five percent of the participants admitted they do not initiate conversations as much as they could for a number of reasons:

- (a) Lack of opportunities to practice speaking English. "*The surrounding environment is not motivating at all... even the teachers speak in Arabic!*" as one of the students stated.
- (b) Speaking English only in presentations.
- (c) Friends do not speak English.

(d) Fear of speaking English. “*We don’t practice speaking English here! I do not have enough confidence to speak with native English speakers. We need to take speaking courses*”. One of the students emphasized.

(e) People may think they are showing off.

(f) Native speakers make fun of them. One of the interviews said:

I try to speak and to initiate conversations but I hate it when some...  
I’m sorry to say it again... rude native speakers make fun of me... they’re  
silly because they learned the language... no I mean they acquired it...  
we put effort to learn the language... they should understand this point and  
stop being that rude”.

### *Trying to Speaking Like Native Speakers*

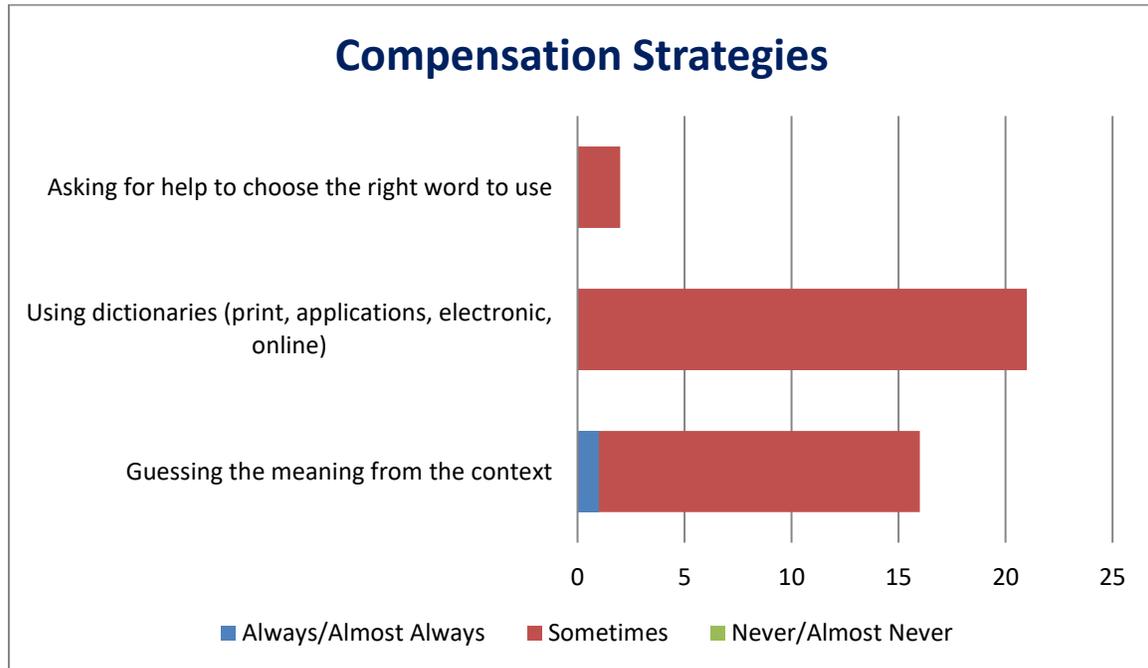
Eighty percent of the participants affirmed they try to speak like native English speakers by imitating their accent and using idioms and everyday language they use. One of the participants stated:

Yes! I try to imitate the pronunciation... I like the American accent.  
When I watch movies, I try to learn the way they pronounce certain  
words”.

Another student said,

I try to ‘swallow’ letters and merge words ‘you + have = you have’...  
I also try to use some expressions to be like native English  
speakers”.

## Compensation Strategies



**Figure 4: Frequency of Compensation Strategy Use**

### *Asking for Help*

Forty percent of the participants said that when they cannot think of a word during a conversation they usually ask for help. They seek assistance from instructors and colleagues who might help them use the right word or suggest another. *“I try to use a similar word... and... mmm... I sometimes ask for help... I ask the people I’m talking to suggest a good word”* in the words of one of the participants. Some of them do not directly ask for help. Gestures and facial expressions express their need for urgent assistance. One of the participants said, *“I stammer until someone helps”*.

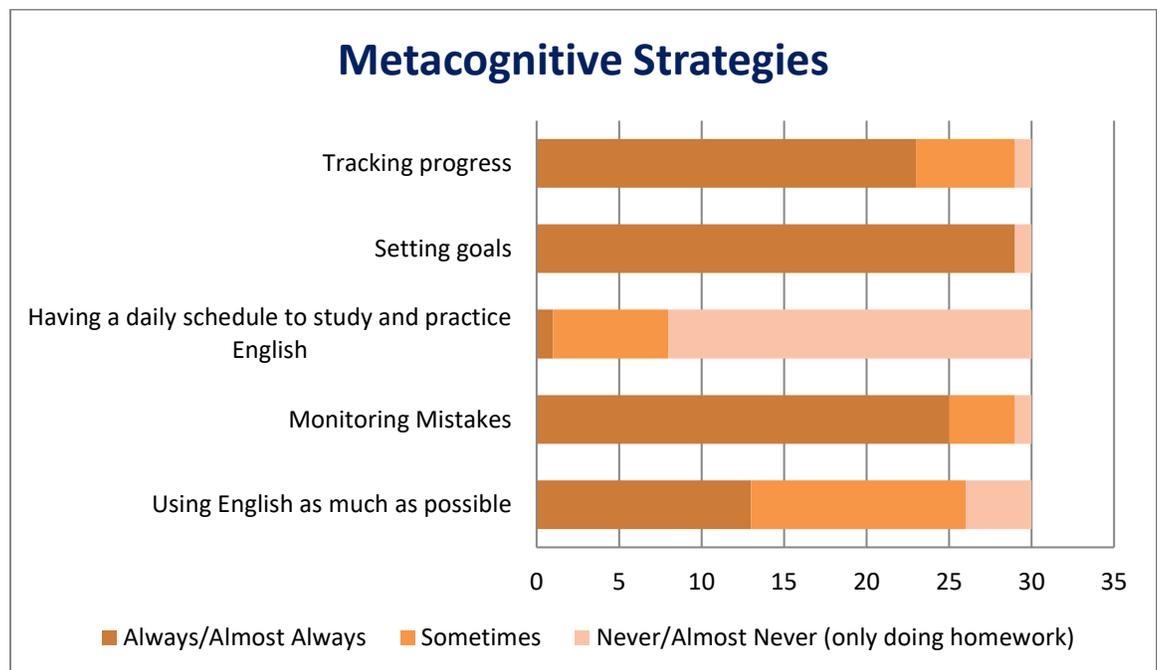
### *Using Dictionaries*

Other participants reported they use online and electronic dictionaries to look up words they did not understand. *“I use my electronic dictionary... I use it in translation classes.”* *“I use Google Translate”.*

### *Guessing from the Context*

The researcher asked the participants about what they might do if they do not understand the meaning of an English word. Most of them stated that they try to guess the meaning from the context as one of the participants stated: *“I try to guess the meaning from the context”.*

## **Metacognitive Strategies**



**Figure 5: Frequency of Metacognitive Strategy Use**

### *Tracking Progress*

Participants mentioned several ways that they use in order to gauge their progress in learning the language. Some of them said that they evaluate themselves. In the words of one of them:

I evaluate myself when I talk to others... especially native speakers.  
I evaluate my performance in presentations. I do not take into account the teachers' evaluation because they depend on particular assignments and exams... on marks"

Others said they notice improvement in their language skills. They stated:

I changed a lot since the first year... I feel happy because I am now able to analyze hard texts... when I read a novel or watch a movie I criticize it... I understand hidden messages and symbols".

My language was so poor in my first year... I was in a public school. I think I am somewhat autonomous... I put so much effort to improve my language... I did everything to become better... I am not perfect but I have made a real progress".

Another participant said:

When I talk to others, I feel that my speaking skills are better than before. When I read or watch movies... I feel that my listening and reading comprehension... significantly improved".

### *Setting Goals*

Language learning goals participants talked about include:

#### *1. Improving language skills*

- a. Learning new words and expressions: *"I think I need to learn new words... I want to open the dictionary and memorize one, two, three, four, five words. I*

*need to add new words to “my dictionary” in the words of one of the participants.*

- b. Improving speaking skills: *“First of all, I need to improve my speaking! I want to go to the States for a couple of months to learn English and to improve my speaking... my uncle lives there”.*
  - Interacting with native speakers
  - Speaking English fluently: one participant said, *“I want to speak English fluently...”* Another one said: *“I want to be as fluent as a native speaker!”*
- c. Improving writing by writing more essays O: *“I HAVE to improve my writing... writing is the hardest and the most complicated skill”.*
- d. Improving reading by reading more books: one of the participants said, *“I love reading... and I want it to be part of my daily routine”.* Another one stated, *“I need to start reading in English... I have a list of the novels I want to buy... I didn't buy... and didn't read!”*
- e. Improving listening comprehension: *“I need to read more and to improve my listening comprehension”* in the words of one of the participants.
- f. Practice translating legal texts: *“I want to practice translating legal texts”* one of the interviewees said.

#### *Having a Daily Schedule to Study & Practice English:*

In response to a question about the way they plan their daily schedule to allow them to study and practice English, eighty percent of the participants said they do not have a learning plan. One of the participants said

OMG! I do not want to remember! It is a disaster! I do not plan... and when I decide to plan... everything goes wrong. When I plan I literally do nothing! I only study before the exams... and sometimes... I surprisingly get good marks”.

Even those who plan they have a hard time adhering to their plans. One of the students said:

I cannot adhere to a plan... a daily schedule! Things happen automatically... I do not think of what I have to do... I know that I am losing so many chances to improve my language... I am depressed.

### *Monitoring Mistakes*

Participants were asked about the way they monitor their English mistakes and use that information to help them do better. Eighty percent of them answered that they usually learn from their mistakes. One of them said, “I know that everyone makes mistakes but I really feel embarrassed when I make mistakes so I never make the same mistake. I learn from my mistakes”. Another one said:

I always do... I am still learning... and everybody makes mistakes. I always learn from my mistakes... believe it or not... I love the mistakes... because they make me think of the language... they help me do better”.

Forty percent think of the reasons behind making certain mistakes. “... I try to learn from my mistakes. If I make a mistake, I try to know the reason why I made it. I write notes” as one of them put it. Other participants stated that exams results help them monitor their mistakes, writing help them edit and correct their mistakes. Some of them write down the mistakes they made so that they never forget them. One of the participants said:

I want to show you my notebook... look... I write my notes here... when I make mistakes I write them down here... look there is grammar mistakes, writing mistakes, spelling mistakes... etc. I write the mistake and correct it in this column... I always do that... this strategy helped me do less mistakes because I learn from the mistakes.

## *Using English as much as Possible*

### *Listening*

In response to the question about how often they pay close attention when someone is speaking English, eight five of the participants stated that they usually pay attention. They watch movies and documentaries, listen to English conversations and listen to music because: (a) they enjoy listening to native speakers; (b) they learn new words and expressions; (c) they love the language, (d) people may ask them about what is being said and (e) they need to assess their listening comprehension. One of the participants said “*ALWAYS! Not only because I am an English major... I love the language... it attracts me*”.

Another interviewee stated:

I usually pay close attention even when people are not talking to me... because someone may ask me to translate... especially my family. I have to listen to anybody speaks English... if I didn't translate to my family they will mock me... simply because I am an ENGLISH MAJOR!

Another participant said

I always pay close attention when someone is speaking English because I have to learn the language... and sometimes I do so to evaluate my listening... my understanding to the language.

### *Speaking*

Ninety percent of the participants said they do not practice speaking English because they feel afraid of speaking English and their family and friends do not speak English. “I don't practice my English in my daily life... my friends and my family don't speak English,” one of the participants said. Only few of the interviews said they practice English with their friends or co-workers. “I try to speak English with my co-workers” as one of the participants stated. . One of the participants said she makes friendships with

native speakers to benefit from them “I make friendships with native speakers in order to benefit from them and to practice speaking English”.

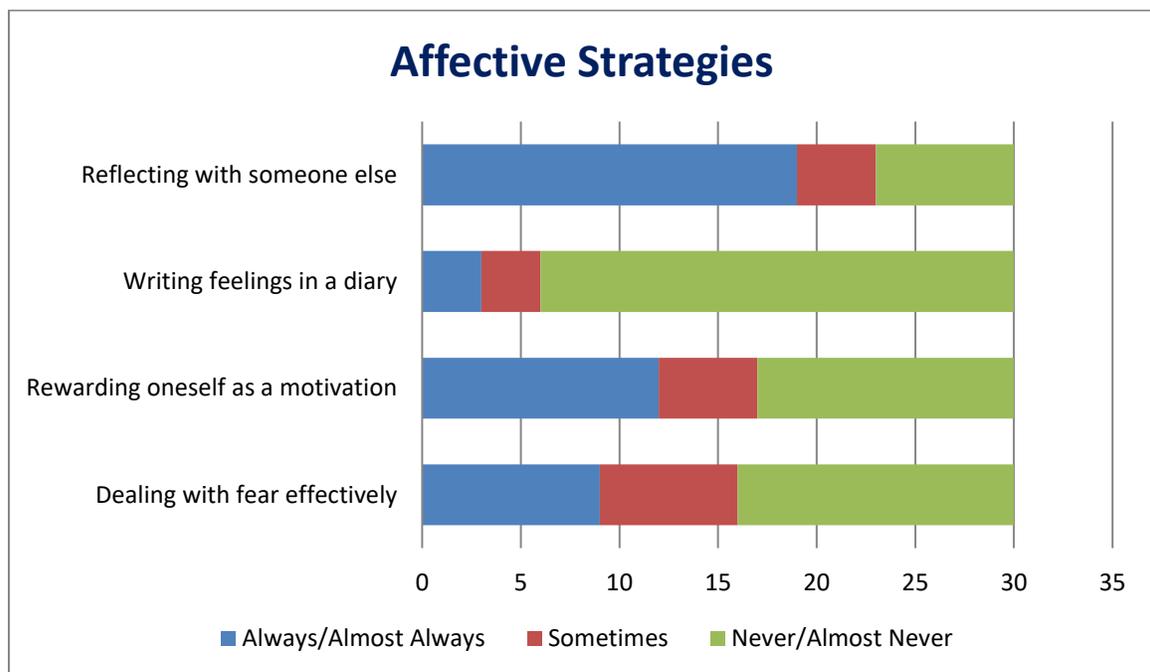
### *Reading*

Eighty percent of the participants reported they do not read in English. However, those who read they read summaries and analysis of novels or poems, short stories and novels or historical books every day. “Every day! I told you before... I prefer historical books... historical fiction” in the words of one of the participants.

### *Writing*

Forty percent of the participants said they practice writing in English. They tend to write different kinds of essays and reports. They also write messages and posts on social media websites.

## **Affective Strategies**



**Figure 6: Frequency of Affective Strategy Use**

The researcher asked the participants several questions about the way they feel learning English and how they deal with both positive and negative feelings. Two themes emerged from the participants' responses: encouragement and avoidance.

### *Reflecting with Someone Else*

Six participants said they do not talk to anybody about how they feel learning English. One of them said, *"I can't express my feelings to anybody! Nobody can understand me!"* Other participants stated they usually talk to their friends, instructors, or family members (e.g. parents, sisters, husbands). *"I usually talk to my family. It is like a reflection... a healthy outlet. Actually, studying English was not my choice... it was my parents' choice!"* in the words of one of the participants.

### *Writing Feelings in a Diary*

Participants were asked a question about writing down their feelings in a language-learning diary. Ninety percent stated they do not have a language-learning diary. They do not write about how they feel learning English. One of the participants said *"... I don't write down my feelings..."* Others said they sometimes write diaries on Facebook but not about learning English. Only three of them reported they sometimes write in a language-learning diary.

### *Rewarding Oneself as a Motivation*

To stay motivated participants reported that they do a variety of things. These include talking a day off and relaxing, going shopping, buying a new book or a gift to oneself, and talking to their parents about their achievement. In the words of one of the participants,

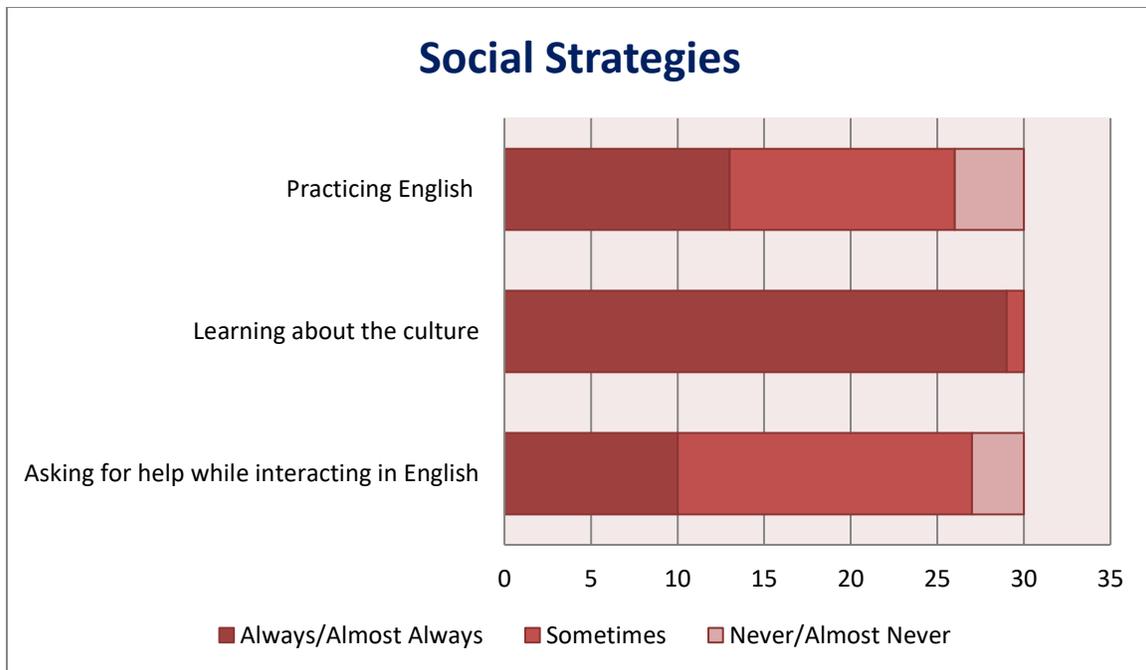
“when I achieve something really special I take a day off... I study nothing... I just relax and enjoy life with my family”. Another participant stated

I talk to my parents about what I have done. It is the best reward for me!  
Yesterday we discussed a novel with Dr. Ahmad Harb and he admired one of my comments about the education in China during the Cultural Revolution... I felt happy... and I wrote more about this issue.

A number of participants added that feeling happy and satisfied is the best reward from their point of view. “Happiness and satisfaction are the real rewards” as one of them put it.

#### *Dealing with Fear Effectively:*

Forty percent of the participants said they could control negative feelings while learning English. They encourage themselves to speak in English when they are afraid of making a mistake or people make fun of them. Four participants stated they speak confidently and pretend they are fine. One of the participants said: “People don't make fun of me because I'm not bad... I am good... very good! But when I feel afraid I try to laugh and pretend that I'm ok”. Others said that self-talk help them feel better. In the words of one of them, “I encourage myself...“you can do it!”, “do not feel afraid!” “Everyone makes mistakes!” Moreover, self-confidence helps them get rid of fear and anxiety. “*I always feel afraid but this feeling never prevents me from speaking... I speak with native speakers... I participate in class... I give presentations*” as one of interviewees mentioned. Some of them reported they do not care if people make fun of them. One of them added that remembering her own goals help her control negative feelings. In her own words, “I remember my goals... the goals I need to achieve”.



**Figure 7: Frequency of Social Strategies Use**

## **Social Strategies**

While interviewing the participants they demonstrated use of some social strategies while learning the language and using it. Two main themes emerged from the participants' responses: seeking help and learning about the culture.

### ***Practicing English***

This strategy has been presented in detail under the Metacognitive Strategies under the title "Using English as much as Possible".

### ***Learning about the Culture***

Participants stated they try to learn about the target culture by: (a) watching movies, documentaries, series and TV shows, (b) reading books and novels, (c) listening to songs,

(d) using social media websites (e.g. Facebook), and (e) asking native speakers about the culture. Forty five percent of the participants believe that in such an open world it is so easy to know more about different cultures and people. *“Watching movies... listening to music! It’s so easy to learn about the culture in such a globalized world”*. *“Native speakers reflect the culture... in their behaviors!”* another student stated.

### *Asking for Help*

Eighty percent of the participants indicated they seek help from others when they do not understand someone speaking to them in English. Most of them said they ask the speaker to slow down or say it again. *“I ask them to say it again... I ask them “what do you mean?”* in the words of one of them. Moreover, some of them ask people to correct them when they make mistakes. *“When I make mistakes I ask the people I’m talking to ... to correct my mistakes”* a participant stated. Others try to use gestures, facial expressions and body language to show they did not understand.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to find out the autonomous learning strategies that 4<sup>th</sup> year non-native English major university students’ use. Participants highlighted a range of practices that reflect use of both direct and indirect strategies. Their responses indicated that many of them use language-learning strategies unconsciously and without really knowing they are using strategies and the type of the strategy if they use it.

Participants are aware of the importance of activating the previous knowledge before dealing with the new knowledge. They use what they have learned in the past to target gaps in their knowledge in particular areas or subjects and to create a bridge and

draw connections between previous knowledge and the new materials. This reminds us of the constructivist learning theory that confirms that the new knowledge is constructed from the previous knowledge. Piaget (1985) focused on this issue and indicated that learners combine experience and prior knowledge.

Some of the participants pointed out that they cannot build bridges between the previous and the new knowledge because there are differences between learning at school and at university. At university, the English they learn is much more advanced from what they have learned at school. They study the language deeply, deal with different kinds of literary works and themes, and analyze aspects of English texts (linguistic, cultural, historical ...etc.). In addition, they learn how to criticize literary works in light of theories and approaches and discuss different interpretations of texts. Moreover, they write in different genres and study linguistics (phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax) to develop their fluency and accuracy. In contrast and based on one of the authors extensive observations and experience and in teaching English as a foreign language in Palestine, learning English at school is often ineffective. Although the Palestinian curriculum is 'supposed' to be developing higher order thinking skills among students and helping them communicate freely and effectively, most of the students end up 'knowing' very poor English. Many schools and teachers do not deal with English as a priority and keep focusing on grammar and vocabulary rather than on listening and reading comprehension, practicing speaking and interacting with native English speakers. Moreover, many teachers are not qualified to teach English effectively. They lack knowledge, accuracy, fluency, instructional and assessment strategies. On the other hand, many students have negative attitude towards learning English and tend to depend on their teachers as the main source

of information. It should be noted, however, that there is a number of elite private schools (e.g. Ramallah Friends Schools, American School of Palestine) serving Palestinian students and particularly those returning to the area from the states and graduating students with high English proficiency.

Participants discussed their practices before and after attending English classes. Some of them pointed out that they prepare for literature classes more than linguistics classes. They feel they have to prepare for literature classes to avoid criticism and embarrassment because teachers ask them to prepare and give them quizzes. Additionally, if they understand some basics in linguistics, they can build on this ‘previous knowledge’ and understand the new material even if they did not prepare. On the contrary, if, for example, they did not read a novel and they know nothing about it, they cannot answer any question related to it. Some of them prepare for literature classes simply because they love literature. Those who prefer literature tend to be good readers and have interest in culture, history ...etc.

Few participants said they prepare for linguistics classes more than literature classes because they “love” linguistics or because they need to listen to the teacher and understand the subject being explained. Those who prefer linguistics tend to prepare to be able to participate and answer questions. This leads us to think of the way learners’ emotions and attitudes affect their learning preferences and levels.

Three participants stated they prepare for both linguistics and literature classes. They believe preparing before classes help them participate effectively and answer

teachers' questions. Regardless of their preferences, they prepare for both because they refuse to be passive. They work hard to be active, effective and high achievers.

Many participants admitted they do not prepare before classes. Some of them argue they have no time to prepare. In fact, it seems that distraction and lack of motivation are the major reasons behind lack of preparation. Distraction is usually caused by chaos and interruption caused by smartphones' applications, social media websites, and games and chatting with friends. Most importantly, absence of a learning plan and, consequently, lack of objectives and expected outcomes lead to demotivation and lack of preparation. Those who really do not have time to prepare have a heavy work schedule and cannot handle stress caused by studying at university and working at the same time. They are unable to manage time and effort effectively.

Only two participants stated they review after English classes. It seems that they are aware of the fact that if they do not review, information will be lost gradually. In contrast, the vast majority of the participants said they only review before exams. They believe that preparing for exams is a strenuous mission so they keep avoiding it until the last minute when there is a threat of failing in the exam. Many students count on last night cramming and end-up sleep deprived the day before the exam. They might think that it is better for them to study at the last minute because if they study a long period before the exam they forget the material. This may also lead us to blame the system that is built on attending classes and taking exams during the semester and at the end of the semester. This system is also the reason why they keep postponing reviewing until the last minute.

Another issue that was discussed with the participants is speaking like native speakers. We cannot deny the fact that it is prestigious to speak English fluently. Students aim to look intellectual since English is the language of science and media industry. Moreover, speaking English fluently opens more opportunities for getting a good job. Some of them do not mind speaking English with the accent of their native language (Arabic) even if their strong accent affected comprehension of the people with whom they are interacting. They consider learning the accent a waste of time arguing that as long as the receiver understands what is being said, there is no need to learn the accent. Others may think they cannot get the accent since they are adults and 'unable' to acquire the language and speak it like kids. When an Arab kid, for example, moves to the states, he/she acquires the language and perfects the accent. In contrast, adults tend to have some strong accent when they learn the language in later stages.

Students do not have opportunities to practice speaking English. They need more inclusive, motivating and respectful environment. English classrooms are supposed to be more dynamic, effective and fun. Drama classes, for example, should train students to be more creative and imaginative and improve their speaking through initiating conversations and representing scenes. On the other hand, many students do not get enough support and encouragement at home because their family members do not speak English, do not appreciate speaking English, or make fun of them when they try to speak English. Moreover, students' personalities (introverts vs. extroverts) affect their tendency to practice speaking English and initiating conversations with others.

Some of the participants expressed avoidance when they cannot think of a word during a conversation and when they do not know the right word to use. They simply

change the subject or stay silent. Reasons behind avoidance may include: fear of making mistakes, worrying about people's criticism (face saving), low self-esteem and frustration, comparing themselves with other students (fluent or native speakers) and lack of using English out of class (in their daily life). They do not participate during lessons and stay anxious because teachers call on students to answer questions. They feel shy and afraid of asking or answering questions in class. Peer-pressure makes them feel afraid of negative evaluation especially if they have poor vocabulary, pronunciation or grammar. Other reasons include being not sure of what to say or how to say it, thinking in Arabic and translating into English, having poor pronunciation and inability to express themselves using English. It is obvious; therefore, that psychological factors, negative feelings and linguistic barriers prevent students from practicing speaking and improving their language.

On the other hand, ability to control negative feelings while learning English, having the courage to speak in English when they are afraid of making a mistake or people make fun of them, self-empowerment with positive self-talk and positive coping statements, keeping eyes on learning goals, knowing priorities, and managing time and effort to enhance learning are reasons behind having some students who have the confidence and the courage to speak in English even if they are not fluent. They start thinking of mistakes as a motive for improvement. Making mistakes motivate them to improve their language so that they can avoid making the same mistakes repeatedly. This depends on students' personality and ability to control stress and negative feelings. Fear, lack of confidence and avoidance can prohibit learning.

Presentations are sometimes the only chance to speak in English. Even those who prefer to stay silent have no choice but to speak when they have presentations. Many

students tend to memorize the content of the presentation hoping to avoid making mistakes. They speak better than in ordinary situations because when they have presentations they talk about something they prepared for previously.

Reading is the ‘perfect’ activity that improves verbal abilities and linguistic inventory and enhances imagination and creativity. Unfortunately, many participants are considered non-readers. They lack skills and strategies used by ‘professional’ readers. Reasons behind not having reading as a habit may include considering it an ‘intimidating activity’. This stems from lacking effective reading strategies that help them read efficiently taking into consideration the nature of the text. In addition, having poor vocabulary, distraction, lack of motivation towards reading because they simply think there is no reason to read and having a heavy schedule are other reasons behind not considering reading a pleasant activity. It is possible that some of them lost the track and did not find the book that will awaken their passion for reading. On the other hand, those who read spend their time wisely, improve their speaking and writing skills, enhance their imagination, creativity and memory, and become more reflective and critical.

Writing is also a ‘great’ activity that helps language learners improve their language skills and organize their ideas and thoughts. One of the challenges facing foreign language learners is literal translation. Many participants confirmed they avoid literal translation (word-for-word translation). They possibly avoid it because literal translation may help understand the meaning of a text without showing its beauty and coherence, however. Literal translation of idioms, for example, may result in vague sentences or silly jokes.

Other participants admitted they sometimes translate word-for-word. They should interact with native speakers, read intensively and practice speaking and listening so that they can stop translating and start thinking in English. Thinking in Arabic and translating may result from using English – Arabic dictionaries rather than English-English dictionaries. Moreover, learning the language focusing on grammar and vocabulary memorization prevent students from ‘experiencing’ the language and speaking it fluently. Translating Arabic texts into English may also be confusing or complicated for some participants. This refers to the fact that it is difficult to find a suitable equivalent and that they may end up writing run-on sentences or repeating expressions and synonyms to emphasize an idea or a message. Students need to read different kinds of texts to learn the way English is written and expressions are used especially because English and Arabic have different writing systems.

Most of the participants studied at public schools. After twelve years of studying English at school, they end up having low level of English proficiency. Therefore, when they start studying at university, and some of them choose to major in English, most of them are usually in elementary, pre-intermediate or low-intermediate levels. Writing is one of the skills with which students find difficulties. Many of them cannot write short paragraphs or even sentences. When they study English at university, they practice writing different kinds of essays, reports, CVs ... etc. The more they write the more they improve their writing skills. Many of the participants claimed that they made a real progress in writing in comparison to their level in their 1<sup>st</sup> year at university. Therefore, writing good essays is an indication to improvement they have made while studying English as a Foreign Language.

Other indicators to making progress (from students' point of view) include improving their ability to analyze literary works, getting good marks and teachers' assessment and feedback. Students assess their current language level in comparison with their previous level and think of the practices that may help them continue improving their language. Some of them do not use checklists or rubrics; rather they 'observe their performance in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Many people watch movies or read novels without thinking deeply of the symbols and hidden messages behind the text/scenes. English majors tend to be more critical when they read a literary text or watch a documentary or a movie. They practice analyzing and criticizing literary texts in literature classes so they use this knowledge in their daily life when they read or watch something. Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness', for example, is not simply a series of events that readers follow to enjoy the story. It is full of themes (e.g. imperialism, evil), motifs and symbols (fog, river, whited sepulture). Therefore, those who are used to analyze literary texts enjoy the events and understand the issue on which the novel sheds light. Their ability to criticize literary texts reflects the progress they have made after four years of studying English at university.

Getting good marks in exams, essays or presentations may indicate that students are making progress and improving their language. They are intended to measure students' knowledge and language skills. However, we should ask ourselves Are exams and other assessment tools well prepared and designed so that they can assess students' performance in particular areas? What do teachers take into account when they write exams' questions? How do they decide on which answer is better? What makes an answer a typical answer?

What does the exam evaluates (remembering, understanding, applying, memorization, analysis, synthesis)?

Some of the participants stated that teachers' assessment help them know the extent of progress they have made. Full dependence on teachers' feedback may reflect lack of confidence, lack of motivation and lack of awareness of their needs and areas that need improvement. It appears that they do not think deeply and critically of their learning process.

Some of the participants stated they needed to improve their listening comprehension. They live in an Arabic speaking community so most of them are not exposed to English and do not practice it that much. Many of them tend to listen to native speakers, watch movies and TV programs and listen to songs. However, some of them still need to improve their listening comprehension. Reasons behind students' poor listening comprehension include lack of vocabulary (they do not know the most important words in the text), trying to understand every single word, losing attention when they try to understand meanings of the words they do not know and feeling tired because they put so much effort to focus on to which they are listening. In addition, distraction (noise and optical dispersants) around the listeners, inability to understand different accents and 'pretending listening' also justify students' poor listening comprehension.

Most of the difficulties and challenges discussed by the participants stem from a number of factors that include absence of a well-organized well-developed plan and inability to adhere to a plan, inability to deal with affective factors rationally and effectively, and not getting enough support and encouragement. Possible reasons for

inability to follow a plan are: setting goals without having a real motivation to achieve them, setting big goals without thinking deeply and rationally on how to achieve them and what actions should be done (unrealistic), lack of management of time and efforts while learning and executing the plan and giving up!

Affective factors could be both positive and negative. Participants talked about negative affective factors (affective filters) that affect language learning. Anxiety and fear of tests, communication and negative evaluation affect students' learning process negatively. Fear of communication prohibits students from practicing the language and improving their fluency. Moreover, when they feel afraid of speaking in front of others to avoid negative criticism, they lose many opportunities to practice the language and learn from their mistakes. This is reflected by the students' performance in productive skills (speaking and writing). On the other hand, Lack of self-confidence and negative self-image prevent students from making the needed progress. Students with low self-esteem tend to be more introverts and do not communicate in foreign language to avoid making mistakes or losing face. This might be attributed to various factors. These include learners lack of practice and training in emotional intelligence. The unique stressful context in which learners live might also contribute to the absence of the ability of learners to control their feeling during the learning process.

On the other hand, some of the participants have unsupportive friends and family. Others are more fortunate to have people that listen to them and support them. It was noted, however, that some of them did not choose to study English at university. It was their parents' decision! Parents' expectations for their children's education make some of them decide on behalf of their children. In our Palestinian society, we hear about parents who

ignore their children's talents and skills because they think they know better and want to protect their children. In fact, they use their children to fulfill their own dreams or try to protect them from experiencing the same 'bad' experiences. Social status and prestige motivate them to choose particular specialty even though there is something that may suit their children better.

It is obvious that language-learning strategies help language learners improve their level of autonomy. This finding confirms Hakan, Aydin, & Bulent (2015). argument that learning strategies play a vital role in enhancing autonomy among second language learners. Factors affecting use of language learning strategies may include students' motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic), language proficiency, learning environment (supportive, relaxing, stressful, uncomfortable), getting support and encouragement from others (family, friends, teachers), students' personalities (introverts vs. extroverts), preferences, needs and learning styles, their attitudes and beliefs about roles of students and roles of teachers in the learning process, and instructional methods used by university instructors.

Lababidi (2016) has also pointed out that stressful atmosphere made students feel highly anxious and that previous experiences, attitudes and perspectives about learning English affect and may cause anxiety. On the other hand, findings confirm Sadeghi,, Hassani, & Hessari (2014). conclusion that students' needs are among factors that influence the use of strategies and Balci (2017) conclusion that there are significant relationships between language learning strategies and learning styles in an EFL context. Strategies students use are really affected by their learning style.

In light of the previous discussion of the reasons behind the results that have been affected by the context in which the study was conducted, the study offers significant practical implications from which EFL teachers, curriculum developers and teacher trainers could benefit. Some of these implications include:

- Impeding learning strategies into daily lessons so that EFL teachers make their learners aware of them; and how to use such strategies.
- Modeling and encouraging autonomous learning where teachers share with their learners effective autonomous strategies that they could use outside the classroom.
- Considering gradually moving towards student-centered classrooms where students are engaged cognitively and affectively in the learning process.
- Focusing on teaching the four language skills in an integrated method rather than teaching them in isolation or ignoring some of them especially speaking and listening.
- Using authentic language in English classrooms at all levels.
- Inspiring and motivating learners to communicate in English wherever possible especially in English classrooms.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

- It might be beneficial to shift the focus away from students onto teachers in order to find out strategies and instructional methods they use in EFL classrooms and the way these strategies influence students' learning strategies and autonomy.

- It is possible to find out with a larger sample the differences in learning strategies use and autonomous learning development among students from different Palestinian universities (e.g. Bethlehem University, Al-Najah National University) and reasons behind such differences.
- Regarding the new technologies and openness to the world, it might be worth conducting a study to investigate the effects of 'the information revolution' on EFL learning strategies use and their effect on developing students' autonomous learning.

## **Conclusion**

The current study investigated the metacognitive, cognitive, affective and socio-interactive strategies that ELLs use in learning English as a foreign Language. The researchers found that ELLs use some learning strategies in all the four categories. Although ELLs found to use some learning strategies, in general their use of such techniques is mediocre at best. Thus, the results of the current study emphasize the significance of making ELLs aware of such strategies and training them on how to use them effectively. Using the following suggested methods to train students to use all types of learning strategies is expected to have a profound effect on their achievement. These are:

- Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL) is a great tool that English as foreign language teachers could use to make their students aware of them and training learners on how to employ them in the process of learning

English. Such training could be explicit where teachers devote whole lesson time exclusively to training learners on how to use these strategies.

- Another way that EFL teachers could train ELLs on how to use the learning strategies effectively is using discrete slots. That is teachers could insert short and separate bits of strategy training into the lesson sequence. In this manner over a short period, teachers could cover all the leaning strategies.
- A third way of training students to use the learning strategies is using an integrated approach where they integrate strategy training in their daily lessons whenever possible.
- A final way is using opportunistic teaching. That is, teachers could stop during the lesson when an opportunity arises to discuss a specific learning strategy they observed students using during an activity.

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