

Learning Strategies (SILL), Beliefs (BALLI), and Styles (R&L) Of Successful Learners of English as a Second Language

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Abstract: This article investigates language learning successfulness of three fluent non-native speakers of English who started learning the language as adults. To this end, four methods were implemented to comprehensively cover all aspects of their lingual success- SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) was used to assess their strategies, BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory) was used to identify their beliefs about English, R&L (Richard and Lockhart model) was used to assess their learning style preferences, and finally in-depth interviews were conducted to assess the other sides of their successful journey of learning English. The research concludes that language learning styles don't intervene in telling if a person is successful in language learning or not; however, it is found that there is a relevant correlation between certain learning strategies and some learning style preferences. It is suggested that future research in this area focus on finding more correlation between language learning styles and strategies related to them in order to help poor students become motivated.

Keywords: SILL, BALLI, Richard and Lockhart model, learning style preferences, learning strategies, language economy

I. INTRODUCTION

Good language learners' characteristics and the strategies they use have been studied by many researchers and scholars in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). In 1990, Rebecca L. Oxford came up with a definition for language learning strategies as "Specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval or use of the new language" (8). Hence, Oxford developed a survey (SILL) to measure the strategies that the second language learners (SLLs) use. This survey has become a frame work for many studies like this current one. Her model is made out of six sections of strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

Oxford drew a skillful distinction between direct and indirect strategies. The former includes "strategies that directly involve the target language" which "require[s] mental processing of the language" (37), whereas the latter "provide[s] indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means" (151).

It is believed that there is a firm correlation between success in learning a second/foreign language and manipulating strategies of acquiring languages accompanied by strongly positive beliefs about learning a particular language. Regarding language beliefs, M. Victori and W. Lockhart define language learning beliefs as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (224). In this regard, E. K. Horwitz developed a model for assessing the language learning beliefs called BALLI consisting of 34 Likert- scale items and containing five categories of beliefs: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations and expectations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This area of research seems to widely appeal many researchers. In addition to the above mentioned Oxford in her 1990, 1995, and 1996 studies, and Horwitz in her 1987, 1988, and 1999 studies, as main figures and authors in this area of second language acquisition, Eva Bernat and Inna Gvozdenko conducted a research in 2005 into interdisciplinary approaches to language learners' beliefs about language learning elucidating how cognitive and personality psychology could provide a foundation for the relationship between learner beliefs and their personality. Similarly, Rodrigo Aragão's 2011 paper argues that beliefs and emotions of learners of English as a second language are inter-related, and it is possible to be observed in the way learners conceive their learning environment as they disclose feelings and beliefs about themselves as learners of a second or foreign language. Nae-Dong Yang's 1999 research found that language learners' "self-efficacy beliefs about English" are firmly associated with their way of using of all kinds of learning strategies. The research argued that learners' beliefs about the nature and importance of learning spoken English are quite linked to their use of formal oral-practice strategies. Correspondingly, Matthew Peacock and Belinda Ho found, in 2003, a positive association between strategies and proficiency in language acquisition. Furthermore, they found differences according to age and gender of the learners in using strategies: older learners were strong in affective and social areas, whereas females were better in using memory and metacognitive strategies. On the same track, Dongyue Liu's 2004 study concluded that there were fundamental gender differences among strategy use, memory strategies and affective strategies with females surpassed males in each case of the study.

Richard Schmidt and Yuichi Watanabe concluded in their 2001 study that motivation affects strategy use. They claimed that the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies is most affected by motivation. Among the types of pedagogical preferences that they investigated, approval of challenging activities was most affected by motivation. Finally, Fateme Saeb and Elham Zamani found, in their 2013 study which investigated the differences between high-school students and students attending English institutes, that students attending English institutes significantly used more strategies such as cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensation, and social strategies. Those students also had more positive beliefs about English as a second language, had better motivation than their peers in high school, and were better students at English.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was conducted to answer these questions:

1. What made the participants successful learners of English as a second language?
2. Were they all alike or almost alike in using the same learning strategies with and having beliefs about English as second language, which is why they were successful?

III. THE STUDY

A. Participants:

Three successful learners of English were interviewed and given the three mentioned surveys to assess their beliefs about and strategies for learning English as a second language. The three of them started learning English after the age of puberty. However, they already had a little knowledge about English from school curricula but could not carry on a conversation in English. All of the three were around the age of thirty when the research was conducted. Two of them Salman and Waqqar are from Pakistan, and the third Ayman is from Egypt. Luckily, they all had the chance to visit the U.S.A during their process of learning English and were still there during the time of carrying this research out. Two of them, Salman and Ayman, are married to native speakers of American English women, but the third Waqqar is not.

B. Instrumentation:

1. SILL:

The model (version 7.0) assesses learners' strategies in the shadow of six categories: remembering more effectively (9 items), using all mental processes (14 items), compensating for missing knowledge (6 items), organizing and evaluating learning (9 items), managing emotions (6 items), and learning with others (6 items). The method employed is a five-point Likert-scale: 1= never or almost never true of me (strongly disagree), 2= usually not true of me (disagree), 3= somewhat true of me (neutral), 4= usually true of me (agree), and 5= always or almost always true of me (strongly agree).

2. BALLI:

It measures learners' beliefs in terms of five parts: the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. The method used for scoring on this model is a five-point Likert scale: 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neither agree nor disagree (neutral), 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree.

3. Richard and Lockhart Model:

It is divided into six categories to assess major and minor learning styles preferences, and each style is subdivided into five items as follows: visual style, tactile style, auditory style, group style, kinesthetic style, and individual style. It employs a five-point Likert-scale: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= undecided, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree.

4. In-depth Interviews:

To authenticate the results of these instrumental models, the three participants were interviewed for a time span of about 50 minutes during which they were asked similar questions to those included in the items of the measurements. Some more questions were added such as language attrition, "Do you think your first language will be negatively affected or lost in a certain time in the future?" language economy, "do you think getting married to a native speaker of English helps in learning English better? The interviewees were also asked twice to rate their English out of ten, first when they entered the United States and second at the time of the interview. Finally, they were asked to talk freely about their language learning experience.

C. Data Collection and Analysis:

Participants were interviewed individually, and the interview sessions were divided into four sections SILL, BALLI, Richard & Lockhart, and then the in-depth interviews. Questionnaires were administered and the in-depth interviews were recorded by the researcher. Gathered data were analyzed and then summarized in tables and charts. Participants' response averages in the three models were compared to each other and then with their interviews responses.

D. Results:

1. SILL:

Participants' answers to each of the six parts of the model were summed and then divided by the number of the items in the group in order to get the average of the participants' usage of the strategies of that group. According to Oxford, the average is considered to be high if it is somewhere between 3.5 and 5.0, medium 2.5 and 3.4, low 1.0 and 2.4. Table (1) below shows that the three of them are almost always in the medium area of using learning strategies.

TABLE I: SILL Average of Strategy usage for the Participants

Strategies	Waqar's average	Salman's Average	Ayman's Average
Remembering more effectively	3 Medium: sometimes used	2.9 Medium: sometimes used	3.3 Medium: sometimes used
Using all mental processes	3 Medium: sometimes used	3.8 High: usually used	4.2 High: usually used
Compensating for missing knowledge	3 Medium: sometimes used	3.3 Medium: sometimes used	3.1 Medium: sometimes used
Organizing and evaluating learning	3.6 High: usually used	4.4 High: usually used	3.6 High: usually used
Managing emotions	2 Low: generally not used	2.6 Medium: sometimes used	2.3 Low: generally not used

Learning with others	3 Medium: sometimes used	4.8 High: almost or almost always used	3.1 Medium: some times used
Overall average	3 Medium: sometimes used	3.7 High: Usually used	3.5 High: usually used

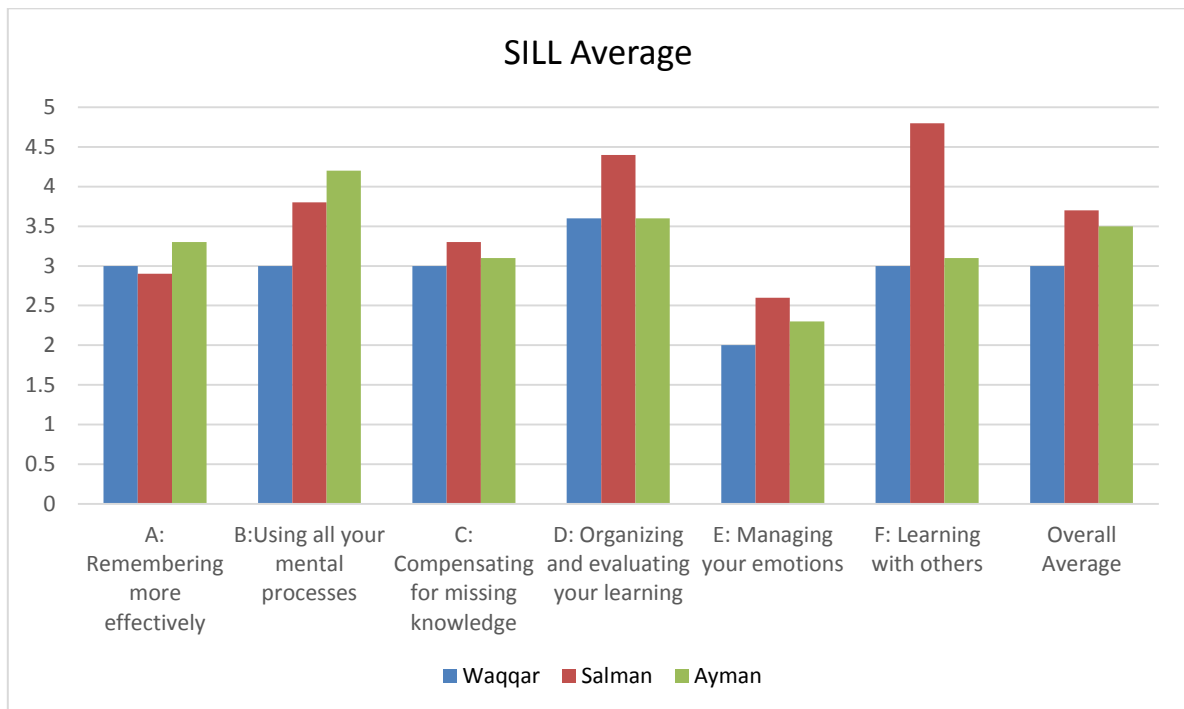


Fig. 1 The Average graph for the SILL participants

2. BALLI:

Participants' answers are given here on the five-point Likert- scale. Participants' initials have been used in the tables, W (waqqar), S (Salman), and A (Ayman). Category number (4) *Learning and communication strategies* was purposely omitted since strategies are covered within the SILL model. To fit in the tables below, BALLI items were shrunk and abbreviations were used.

TABLE 2: Category one of BALLI model

Items of the Difficulty of Language Learning	Components				
	1	2	3	4	5
Q3 Some Ls are easier to learn than others	A	S		W	
Q4 English is: (levels of difficulty)		A, S	W		
Q5 I will learn to speak English very well	A	W, S	S		
Q15 one hour a day, how long to learn?		W	A		
Q25 easier to speak than to understand a FL.		A, S			W
Q 34 easier to read & write than to speak and unders.		W, S	A		

TABLE 3: Category two of BALLI model

Items of Foreign Language Aptitude	Components				
	1	2	3	4	5
Q1 It is easier for children than adults to l FL.	A, S	W			
Q2 Some people have a special ability for learning FL.	S	A		W	
Q6 People from my country are good at learning FL.	S		A	W	
Q10 easier for sb already speaks a FL to learn another.	W	A	S		
Q11 People good at math or science are not good at FL.			S, W		A
Q16 I have a special ability for learning FL.	S		A, W		
Q19 Women are better than men at learning FL.			S, W	A	
Q30 People speaking more than 1 L are v. intelligent.		A	S	W	
Q33 Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	A, W		S		

TABLE 4: Category three of BALLI model

Items of Nature of Language Learning	Components				
	1	2	3	4	5
Q8 It is necessary to know English cultures to speak it.	S, A			W	
Q12 It is best to learn English in an ES country.	W, S			A	
Q17 The most important part to learn FL is vocab.	S		W	A	
Q23 The most important part to learn FL is grammar.	S, A		W		
Q27 LFL is diff. from learning other academic subjects	S	S, A	W		
Q28 The most important part of FL is how to translate			W, A		

TABLE 5: Category four of BALLI model

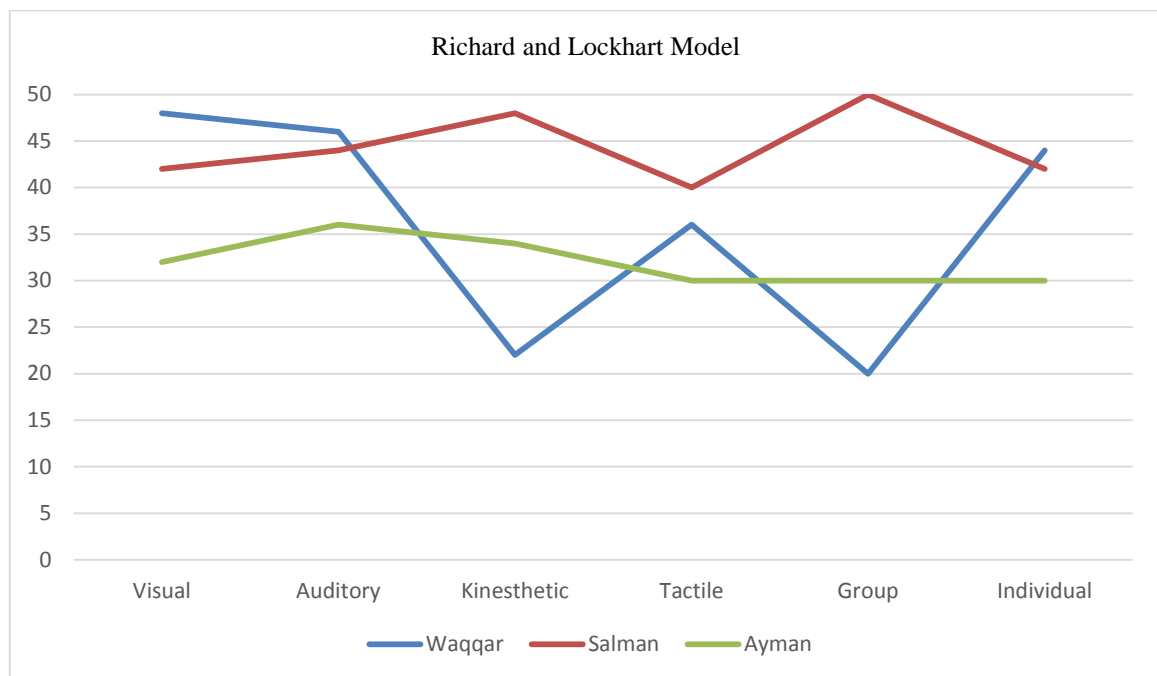
Items of Motivation and Expectation	Components				
	1	2	3	4	5
Q20 People in my country feel it is imp. to speak E.	S, A,				
Q24 I'd like to learn English to know intl. people better	W				W
Q29 If I learn English very well, I'll have a better job.	S, A			W	

3. Richard and Lockhart Model:

According to Richard and Lockhart (1994), a learning style preference becomes major if the score of that preference reaches 38 till 50, minor 25 till 37, and negligible if below 24. The reliability of two participants here needs to be reassessed; Salman got major and Ayman got minor for all the learning styles in the model.

TABLE 6: the sum of the participants' responses for each style multiplied by 2

Participants	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Group	Individual
Waqqar	48 Major	46 Major	22 Negligible	36 Minor	20 Negligible	44 Major
Salman	42 Major	44 Major	48 Major	40 Major	50 Major	42 Major
Ayman	32 Minor	36 Minor	34 Minor	30 Minor	30 Minor	30 Minor

**Fig. 2. The Participants Responses' graph on R & L Learning Style Model**

Participants	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Group	Individual
Waqqar	48 Major	46 Major	22 Negligible	36 Minor	20 Negligible	44 Major
Salman	42 Major	44 Major	48 Major	40 Major	50 Major	42 Major
Ayman	32 Minor	36 Minor	34 Minor	30 Minor	30 Minor	30 Minor

IV. DISCUSSION

A number of significant findings were revealed by the data analysis. It seems that successful learners of a foreign language are generally good users of leaning strategies even if they aren't aware that they are using ones. In SILL model, participants were almost alike in using some strategies such as "remembering more effectively, organizing and evaluating learning," and "managing emotions." Although participants weren't identical in using learning strategies, it is

speechlessly obvious that effectively using different kinds of learning strategies made them successful. Therefore, the results of SILL in this paper are consistent with the findings of previous studies of Yang, Schmidt and Watanabe, Peacock and Ho, and Saeb and Zamani in that more proficient and successful learners of foreign languages use more cognitive, metacognitive and memory strategies than poor language learners.

Regarding language learning beliefs, unlike most researches conducted on language learning beliefs that used BALLI which found a strong association between being successful in language learning and having positive beliefs about it, the most successful participant, Waqqar, according to BALLI model, proved that he didn't have high positive beliefs about learning English as a foreign language. Through the interview, Waqqar was far the best, he never stuttered, never took a time thinking of a word he wanted to use, and was speaking very eloquently in a semi-native accent. In the interview, he informed me that he learned English neither to get a better job nor to get to know more people. Additionally, he didn't speak English at all when he first came to the United States at the age of 16, and he rated his English to only be one out of ten when he first entered the United States. Furthermore, he no more have a lot of native speakers of English as friends. What we think made him successful in English is his school in America, "If I didn't learn English, I wouldn't pass my classes," Waqqar said. Although he was motivated as we can tell from the interview, BALLI model failed to assess his motivation. Consequently, one of the findings of this paper is that BALLI is not an adequate method to assess learners' beliefs about learning a language. For instance, in motivation section, it asks about basic facts that almost all people will give the same answer as in Q20 "people in my country feel it is important to speak English," and very specific questions that only few people can answer as in Q11 "people who are good at math or science aren't good at learning a foreign language." It neglects other important factors in motivation like asking a direct question "I am motivated to learn English," or "there is a strong reason for me to learn English." In addition, the items/ questions are not mono-directed; sometimes it draws the participants' attention to what they believe and then to what other people believe as in Q11 "people good ...," Q20 "people in my country ...," Q19 "women are better...." That is why the participants' answers to most of these questions were "neither agree nor disagree." Thus, this finding against the BALLI meets Patricia Kuntz's 1996 criticism that questioned the validity and reliability of BALLI model.

V. CONCLUSION

In general, all participants had strong enough beliefs—but not alike—in a way or another that helped them being successful learners of English. Salman and Ayman were different from Waqqar in that they had already learned English before they came to the United States, and they believed that getting married to a native speaker of English helped them to be better speakers. They both rated their English to be around 6 out of ten when they moved to the United States.

On the other hand, Richard and Lockhart model didn't show any correlation between learning style preferences and being successful in learning a foreign language. The research concludes that language learning styles don't intervene in telling if a person is successful in language learning or not; however, it is found that there is a relevant correlation between certain learning strategies and some learning style preferences. For instance, Salman whose score on the "group learning" style was "50" got the highest score on "learning with others" category on the SILL model. Therefore, it is suggested that future research in this area focus on finding more correlation between language learning styles and strategies related to them in order to help poor students become motivated. A. U. Chamot states in his 2004 study that research into language learning strategies is encouraged to give a chance to poor students to be trained new strategies, and then become less poor and more efficient learners of foreign languages (14-26).

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