# Tertiary English Learners' Language Learning Strategies: A Key to Learner Autonomy

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*Abstract*: **Learning strategies have been the center of attention and have gained great importance in the teaching-learning environment. These are specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable in new situations. With the conviction that learner strategies are the key to learner autonomy, language teachings most important aspiration should be the facilitation of that key.**

**This study aimed to determine the language learning strategies of students at Ifugao State University (IFSU), the only Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the province of Ifugao. In addition, it will guide language instructors in their language teaching.**

**Rebecca Oxford's Strategy Inventory on Language Learning (SILL) was used as a primary instrument to gather data. Respondents were 290 freshman students from three colleges of IFSU. Slovin's formula and stratified sampling were used to identify number of male and female respondents. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, multivariate analyzes of variances (MANOVAs) and independent samples t-tests.**

**Results revealed that IFSU tertiary freshman students use language learning strategies (LLS) at a medium level. Age and ethno-linguistic affiliation have no significance in the use of LLS; but gender, course and college affiliation affected the use of LLS in the classroom**

*Keywords:* **Language Learning strategies (LLS), language teaching, learner autonomy, SILL, tertiary.**

## I.  INTRODUCTION

Learning strategies have been the center of attention and have gained great importance in the teaching-learning environment (Deneme, 2010). As Tezcan & Deneme (2016) posits that teachers and researchers have noticed that there is not any single research or method that would provide universal achievement in second language teaching. Successes of learners in language learning have been a source of inspiration for teachers and researchers (Brown, 2007), thus enabling them to facilitate invaluable research by shedding light on language learning strategies.

Oxford (2000) stressed that learning strategies are among the main factors that help determine how and how well a student learns a second or foreign language. A second language is a language studied in a setting where that language is the main vehicle of everyday communication and where abundant input exists in that language. In addition, Brown (2000) stated that while we all inherently exhibit human traits of learning, every individual approaches a problem or learns a set of facts or organizes a combination of feelings from a unique perspective. These unique or specific methods that we make on a given problem are called strategies.

Cohen (1996) and Oxford (1990, 1992, 1993) defines learning strategies as the specific actions taken by learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. Further, learning strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help comprehend, learn or retain new information" (Rubin, 1987; O' Malley & Chamot,1999). In the context of language learning, Oxford (1994)

highlights that language learners use the strategies consciously to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the target language.

Strategies vary intra-individually. Strategies are the moment-by-moment techniques that we employ to solve "problems" posed by second language input – learning strategies (deal with the receptive domain of intake, memory, storage, and recall) and output – communication strategies (pertain to the employment of verbal or nonverbal mechanisms for the productive communication of information). The application of both learning and communication strategies to classroom learning has come to be known generically as strategies-based instruction (SBI) (McDonough, 1999, Cohen, 1998), or as learner strategy training.

Research demonstrated that students apply learning strategies while learning a second language as evident in many studies on learning strategies that dates back to the 1970s by authors such as Rubin, 1975; Bialystok, 1981; Wenden, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Deneme, 2008; Özmen & Gülleroğlu, 2013; and Tezcan & Deneme, 2016. Hence Brown (2000) postulated that apparently, "teaching learners how to learn" is crucial. Further, Wenden (1985) asserted that learner strategies are the key to learner autonomy, and that one of the most important goals of language teaching should be the facilitation of that autonomy. Likewise, teachers can benefit from an understanding of what makes learners successful and unsuccessful, and establish a milieu for realization of successful strategies in the classroom (Bialystok, 1985). While MacIntyre & Noels (1996) found that, students will benefit from SBI if they (a) understand the strategy itself, (b) perceive it to be effective, and (c) do not consider its implementation to be overly difficult.

One of the most useful manuals of SBI available is Rebecca Oxford's (1990a) practical guide for teachers. She outlined host of learning and communication strategies that have been successful among learners. Oxford grouped language learning strategies under two major classes: direct and indirect strategies which are sub-divided into six sub-groups (memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective, and social). Language learning strategies that directly involve the target language are called direct strategies and all direct strategies require mental processing of the language. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, are grouped as meta-cognitive, affective, and social. These strategies are called "indirect" as they support language learning without directly involving the target language.

Teachers cannot always expect instant success in their effort in teaching since students often bring with them certain preconceived notions of what "ought" to go on in the classroom. Therefore, our efforts to teach students some technical know-how about how to tackle a language are well advised. Through checklists, tests, and interviews, teachers can become aware of students' tendencies and then offer advice on beneficial in-class and extra-class strategies.

It is in this light that this research was conducted to determine the language learning strategies IFSU freshman students' practice in the acquisition of English as a Second Language using Rebecca Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), thereafter giving the baseline for the language teachers/instructors in their language teachings. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. What is the profile of the respondents in terms of the following:

1.1. age,

1.2. gender,y

1.3. course,

1.4. college, and

1.5. ethno-linguistic?

2. What strategy is used by tertiary freshman students of IFSU?

3. Is there a significant difference of the strategies used when respondents are grouped by:

3.1. age,

3.2. gender,

3.3. course,

3.4. college, and

3.5. ethno-linguistic?

## II.  METHOD

*Research Design:*

This is a descriptive study which aimed to determine the language learning strategies (LLS) used by the tertiary freshman students based on different variables as age, gender, course, college, and ethno-linguistic affiliation.

*Participants:*

There were 290 respondents out of the 1,048 freshman students which were determined using Slovins' formula. Stratified random sampling using proportional allocation were utilized where college was used as the stratification variable.  These students were enrolled in the regular subject course Engl. 12 (Writing in the Discipline) across all programs during the second semester school year 2015-2016 at IFSU.

*Research Environment:*

The study was conducted at Ifugao State University, Main Campus, Nayon, Lamut, Ifugao, Philippines. As shown in Fig.1, Ifugao Province is located at the Northern part of the Philippines. Ifugao has 11 municipalities namely: Lamut, Kiangan, Lagawe, Asipulo, Hingyon, Hungduan, Banaue, Mayoyao, Aguinaldo, and Alfonso Lista. Of the 11 municipalities, 6 housed the different campuses of IFSU which was marked with a circle in the map. The main campus is located at Lamut, the municipality that serves as a gate way to the province from Manila via Nueva Vizcaya. This province also is proud to be the site of one of the UNESCO's inscribed world heritage – the Banaue Rice Terraces.
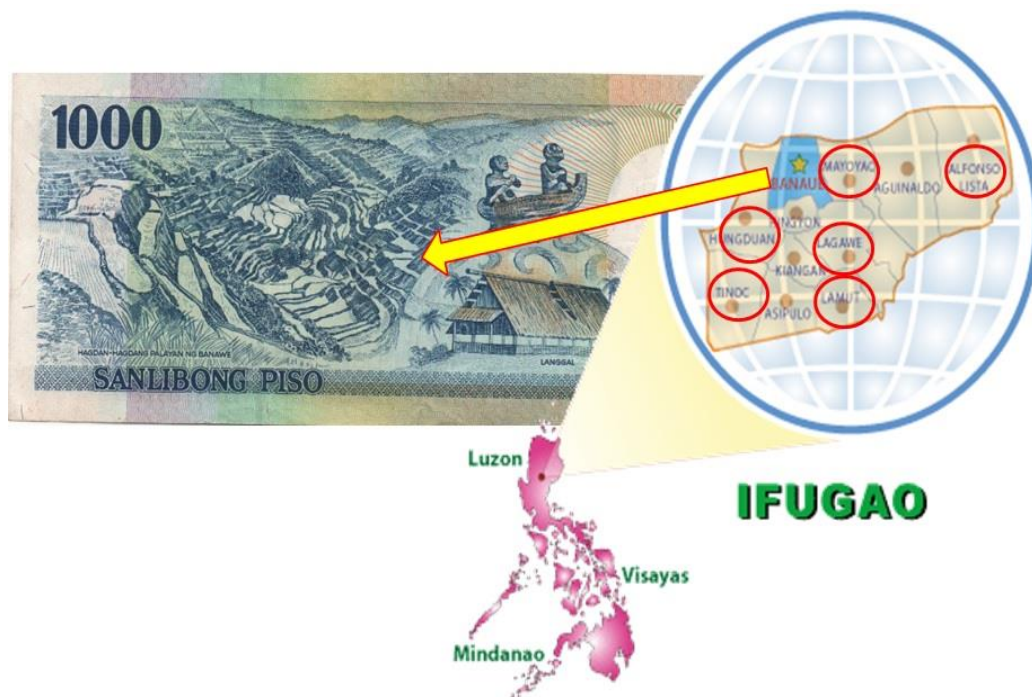


**Fig. 1. Map of the Philippines & the Ifugao Province**

*Instrument:*

A set questionnaire was used as the instrument to gather information from the students. The instrument consisted of two parts. The first part included personal questions about the students such as age, gender, course, college, and ethno-linguistic affiliation. The second part of the questionnaire was Rebecca Oxford's "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" (SILL). The inventory consists of six dimensions and 50 items. The dimensions were remembering more effectively (memory), using all your mental processes (cognitive), compensating for missing knowledge (compensation), organizing and evaluating your learning (metacognitive), managing your emotions (affective), and learning with others (social).

The SILL is a standardized measure with versions for students of variety of languages, and as such can be used to collect and analyze information about large numbers of language learners (Chamot, 2004).

*Data Analysis:*

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, multivariate analyzes of variances (MANOVAs) and independent samples t-tests. Descriptive statistics were used to describe and summarize the properties of the mass of data collected from the respondents. The demographic profile of the college freshmen and frequency of use of language learning strategy were analyzed using descriptive statistics. MANOVAs were used to find the mean differences and statistical significance of differences among two or more groups. Significant level was set at 0.05 alpha level. The independent samples t-tests were used only in situations where the independent variable had two levels, e.g., gender of respondents.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study have been presented below in order of the research questions.

*Profile:*

The respondents of the study were 290 tertiary freshman students. Fig. 2 presents that most of the freshmen were at age level 18 to 19 with 46% followed by 16 to 17 at 41% and only 13% of were at the age of 20 above. It could be associated that most of the freshmen have entered grade school at age 8 since the Philippine educational system has no compulsory kindergarten yet during the time these students entered in the academe. Unlike this time that with the implementation of the K to 12, kids are required to enter kindergarten at age 5 (DepEd DO 16. S 2015).
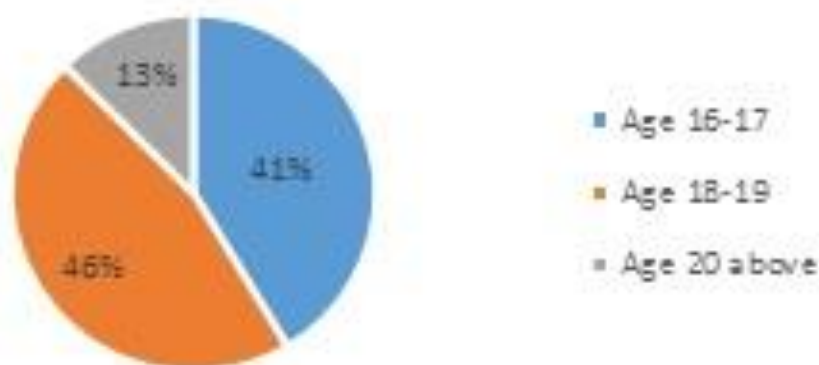


**Fig. 2. Distribution of respondents by age**

The female freshmen dominate the respondents with 56% as shown in fig. 3. This is true because based on the records of the University Registrar, female population was higher across program offerings of the university compared to male except for BS Criminology that has more male enrollees.
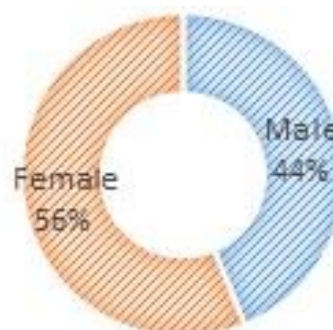


**Fig. 3. Distribution of respondents by gender**

Fig. 4 below presents that most respondents were from the BS Criminology and Diploma in Agricultural Technology. This is due to the fact that these programs have both 300+ population while the other programs have only 70 and below number of enrollees.
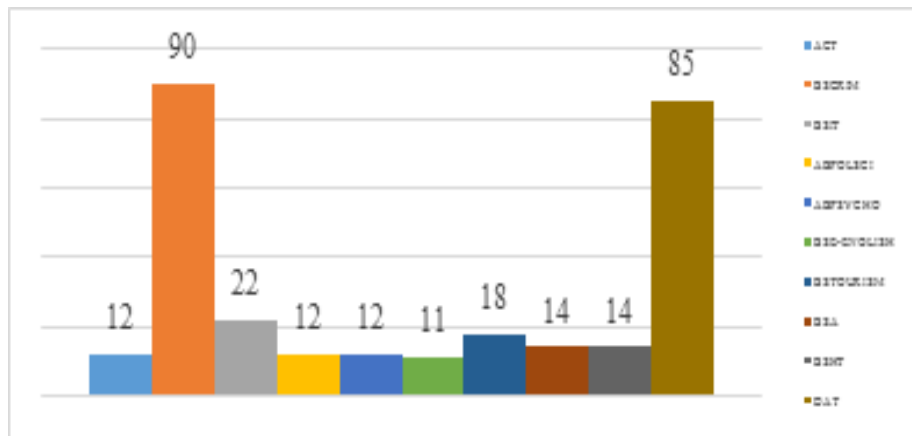
**Fig. 4. Distribution of respondents by course**

Fig. 5 shows that College of Tourism, Home Science, and Agriculture has the most respondents considering the college offers only four programs. In addition, the college hosts a program in agriculture that sends on-job trainees to Israel and USA. Hence, inviting a lot of students.
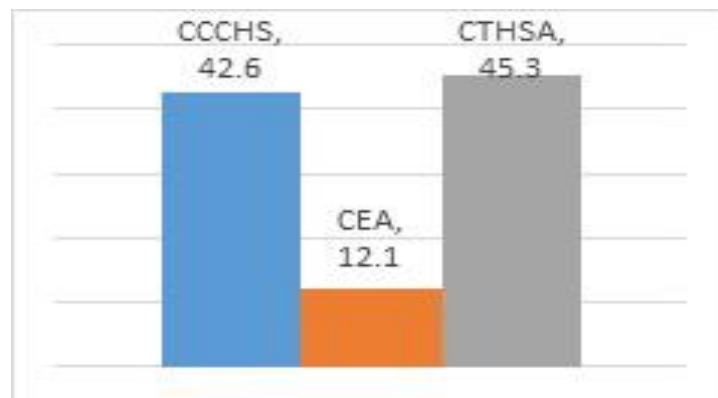


**Fig. 5. Distribution of respondents by college**

Based on ethno-linguistic affiliation, more than half of the respondents were from the Tuwali followed by Ayangan. This could be associated with the fact that most municipalities in Ifugao were occupied by Tuwali.
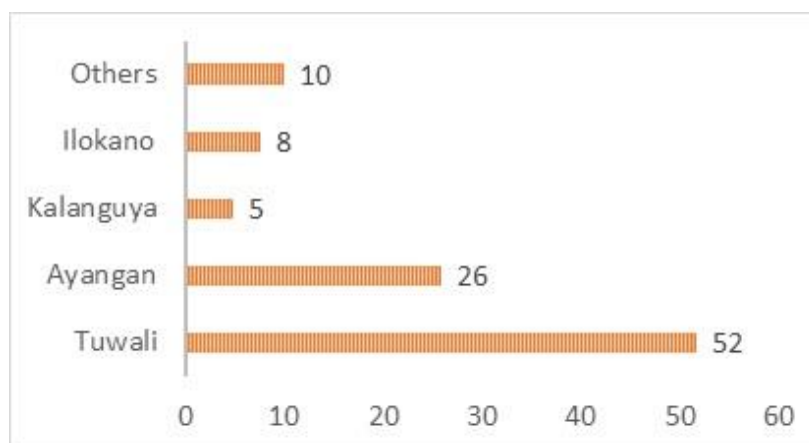


**Fig. 6. Distribution of respondents by ethno-linguistic affiliation**

**Language learning strategy used:**

Table 1 shows the distribution of freshmen's responses on their frequency of use of language learning strategies in the classroom. Cronbach's alpha value of 0.96 for the responses to all the items showed a high internal consistency. This is in consistent with Kline (2005), that alpha value of .90 is considered excellent, .80 very good and .70 acceptable.

It reveals that freshmen utilized all the LLS at medium level as shown by the mean within 2.50 – 3.49 described as sometimes used. Oxford (1989) used the three levels as high, medium, and low. The scale 3.50 – 4.40 (usually used) and 4.50 – 5.0 (always or almost always used) are under high level, 2.50 – 3.49 (sometimes used) is medium level, while 1.0 – 1.49 (never or almost never used) and 1.50 – 2.49 (generally not used) are low level. This implies that freshmen can easily switch to any of the LLS whether it calls for direct or indirect strategies as they are learning an L2 or FL. The result corroborates the study of Özmen & Gülleroğlu (2013) that students at Faculty of Education and Science use all LLS at medium level.

**TABLE 1. Tertiary freshman student's responses for strategies used in language learning**

| Strategies | Mean | SD | Qualitative Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Memory | 3.22 | .68 | Sometimes used |
| 2. Cognitive | 3.25 | .70 | Sometimes used |
| 3. Compensation | 3.21 | .78 | Sometimes used |
| 4. Meta-cognitive | 3.32 | .77 | Sometimes used |
| 5. Affective | 3.22 | .81 | Sometimes used |
| 6. Social | 3.29 | .86 | Sometimes used |

Multivariate analysis (MANOVA) were used to find the mean differences in the use of language learning by age groups. The multivariate result was not significant for age (Wilks' Lambda =0.96, *F-value* = 0.68, p-value>0.05), indicating no difference in the use of language learning among the freshmen in different age groups.

This implies that students learn an L2, in this case English, in similar ways regardless of their age level as presented in the table 2. This further means that language teachers need not to worry if there are younger or older students in the class on as to what activities he/she employs since age has no effect in the learning of an L2. This complements Nambiar (2009) statement that age does not appear to have an influence on how learning strategies are used by learners.

**TABLE 2. Multivariate Analyses of Differences in the use of language learning strategies by age**

| Language Learning Strategies | F-value | p-value | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Memory | .07 | .93 | NS |
| 2. Cognitive | .10 | .90 | NS |
| 3. Compensation | 1.04 | .35 | NS |
| 4. Meta-cognitive | .17 | .84 | NS |
| 5. Affective | .10 | .90 | NS |
| 6. Social | .29 | .75 | NS |

The multivariate result, as shown in Table 3, was not significant for gender (Wilk's Lambda= 0.96, F-value = 2.07, p – value > 0.05). This indicates that there was no significant difference in the use of language learning strategies between male and female freshmen. However, when the analysis was performed independently, there were significant differences in the use of language learning between male and female freshmen in compensation (F=4.88, p<0.05), meta-cognitive (F=7.25, p<0.05) and affective (F=4.63, p<0.05). This indicates that in the teaching-learning processes in language class, the language teacher should consider preparing an instruction that would cater to the strategies likely utilized by the students. More importantly, the language teacher has to design activities harmonizing the strategy where gender has seen to have significance in the L2 learning.

Further statistical analysis revealed that female freshmen were more likely to use language learning strategies in the aforementioned areas than their counterpart. This complements several researches claiming that female use LLS more widely or more frequently than male (Tezcan & Deneme, 2016; Özmen & Gülleroğlu, 2013; Kaylani, 1996; Oxford, Park-Oh, & Sumrall, 1993).

In teaching, this signifies that language learners need to explore different learning strategies by experimenting through the guidance of language teachers until eventually choosing their own set of effective strategy (Chamot, 2004). With the teachers' assistance, the learners should progress up the ladder of their studies and surely unleash out of their comfort zone.

**TABLE 3. Multivariate Analyses of Differences in the use of language learning strategies by gender**

| Strategies | Gender | F-value | p-value | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Memory | Male | 2.05 | .15 | NS |
| | Female | | | |
| 2. Cognitive | Male | 2.03 | .16 | NS |
| | Female | | | |
| 3. Compensation | Male | 4.88 | .03 | S |
| | Female | | | |
| 4. Meta-cognitive | Male | 7.25 | .01 | S |
| | Female | | | |
| 5. Affective | Male | 4.63 | .03 | S |
| | Female | | | |
| 6. Social | Male | .44 | .51 | NS |
| | Female | | | |

Table 4 shows the mean differences in the use of language learning strategies by course. The multivariate result revealed that there was no significant differences in the use of language learning by course enrolled (Wilk's Lambda = 0.80, F = 1.18, p > 0.05). However, univariate analysis revealed that there were significant differences in the use of language learning strategies among the freshmen in memory (F=2.33, p<0.05) and compensation (F=2.39, p<0.05). Post-hoc analysis revealed that freshmen who are taking AB Psychology (M=2.89, SD=0.64) were less likely to use language learning strategies than any other students.

The result implies that language teachers should craft instructions and assessment materials that best fit into the courses the students were enrolled. As Chamot (2009) cited, learners desire to learn a language is related to the value attached to learning that language in society (Mah, 1999), how motivated they are (Lo Castro, 1994), and what opportunities to practice are readily available to them (Kouraogo, 1993).

**TABLE 4. Multivariate Analyses of Differences in the use of language learning strategies by course**

| Strategies | F-value | p-value | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Memory | 2.33 | .02 | S |
| 2. Cognitive | 1.89 | .06 | NS |
| 3. Compensation | 2.39 | .01 | S |
| 4. Meta-cognitive | 1.53 | .14 | NS |
| 5. Affective | 1.71 | .09 | NS |
| 6. Social | .96 | .47 | NS |

Table 5 shows the mean differences in the use of language learning strategies by college affiliation. The multivariate result revealed that there was no significant differences in the use of language learning by college affiliation (Wilk's Lambda = 0.93, F = 1.70, p > 0.05). However, univariate analysis revealed that there were significant differences in the use of language learning strategies among the freshmen in memory (F=4.16, p<0.05) and compensation (F=3.76, p<0.05). Post-hoc analysis revealed that students in CTHSA (M=3.33, SD=0.74) were more likely to use language learning strategies than students in CCCHS (3.09, SD=0.58).

This posits that the college where the students belong is a determinant of what preferred LLS is used. Hence, language teachers have to corroborate the students' LLS with teaching style that is adaptable and suitable to each college. As Tezcan and Deneme (2016) cited that teachers should be aware of what LLS their students prefer to use and accordingly deliver strategy instruction to their students as an important part of language curriculum (Cohen, 1998).

**TABLE 5. Multivariate Analyses of Differences in the use of language learning strategies by college affiliation**

| Strategies | F-value | p-value | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Memory | 4.16 | .02 | S |
| 2. Cognitive | 2.01 | .14 | NS |
| 3. Compensation | 3.76 | .02 | S |
| 4. Meta-cognitive | 1.45 | .24 | NS |
| 5. Affective | 2.37 | .10 | NS |
| 6. Social | .75 | .47 | NS |

The multivariate result was not significant for ethno-linguistic affiliation (Wilk's Lambda = 0.93, F = 0.91, p < 0.05). This indicates that there was no difference in the use of language learning among the freshmen when grouped according to ethno-linguistic affiliation. It can be generalized from here that ethno-linguistic affiliation or environment where one grown is not a factor in the second language learning in this case of Ifugao Province and its neighboring provinces.

The findings were conclusive in this case only as the respondents may differ in ethno-linguistic affiliation but still all were of the same race. Researchers conducted in other countries comparing ethnicity and LLS show that the work is still uncoordinated and in a state of early infancy (Nambiar, 2009).

**TABLE 6. Multivariate Analyses of Differences in the use of language learning strategies by ethno-linguistic affiliation**

| Strategies | F-value | p-value | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Memory | .52 | .72 | NS |
| 2. Cognitive | .31 | .87 | NS |
| 3. Compensation | .54 | .71 | NS |
| 4. Meta-cognitive | .29 | .89 | NS |
| 5. Affective | .47 | .76 | NS |
| 6. Social | .31 | .87 | NS |

## IV.  CONCLUSION

The research has focused on the language learning strategies (LLS) IFSU freshman students' used based on different demographic profiles. Result revealed that the respondents utilized all the LLS in medium level. Age and ethno-linguistics affiliation have no significance in the use of LLS, however, gender, course (the degree the students are taking), and college affiliation have significance in their choice of language learning strategy they use in the classroom.

This study benefits the language faculty of IFSU in their language teaching pedagogy. Moreover, the result serves as enlightenment to both teachers and learners. Teachers can now fit its assessment strategy to the preferred LLS of the students. Furthermore, they can craft instructions and assessment materials that will develop the other LLS the students should acquire. In effect, teachers are helping the students advance their autonomy in learning the English language. On the other hand, the learners may become aware that there are other LLS that they can use in language learning. With this, they will not only be dependent in one or two LLS that they use in the classroom.

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