English Language Learning Strategies at the Syrian Virtual University: students' and Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

This research seeks to extend our current knowledge in the area of distanct English language learning by exploring the language learning strategies used by students at the Syrian Virtual University (SVU).

Hurd et al (2001) maintain that for learners to successfully complete a distance language program, they need to maintain their motivation and to develop a series of strategies and skills that will enable them to work individually. Few studies explored the language learning strategies employed in the virtual mode of learning. The objective of this paper is to make a first hand evaluation of the type and frequency of language learning strategies utilized by SVU learners to enhance their learning. This study will also examine whether there exists a relationship between increased linguistic proficiency and greater strategy use. Points of intersection between learners' and teachers' perceptions regarding the use of language learning strategies will also be explored.

An adapted version of Hurd's (2000) inventory of language learning strategies of distant learners at the Open University was used as the instrument for collecting data. Results suggest that Syrian students do use a number of language learning strategies. However, they show distinct preferences for the mechanical and productive rather than the reflective type of skills. Findings also reveal the existence of a relationship between the use of some language learning strategies and

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learners' linguistic proficiency. A major finding of this study is the high accord between the strategies students reported using highly frequently and those which teachers reported regarding as highly important. Results may be used in the future to inform pedagogy and hence the outcomes from this research may be significant in a country where the learning of English in recent years has become an important educational requirement.

Keywords: The Syrian Virtual University; distance learning; virtual learning; language learning strategies; autonomy; cognitive strategies; metacognitive strategies; TEFL

1. Background and rationale

1.1 Teaching English at the Syrian Virtual University (SVU)

The Syrian Virtual University (SVU), one of the first online universities in the Arab region, is a public institution fully accredited and endorsed by the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education. Inaugurated in 2002, the SVU offers students home and abroad the opportunity to gain education through an online learning environment based on the latest technology. Since English has become an important educational requirement in Syrian education, it has by de facto entered the arena of virtual learning. Delivered online, the English language has become a prerequisite for graduation in all programmes at the SVU

In a country where English is taught as a foreign language (TEFL) and where learners do not find many chances to use the language in everyday communication, the learning of the language is not that simple. The novelty of the virtual medium of instruction as well puts more demands on SVU learners. Hurd et al. (2001:343) described distance language learners' dilemma as one where learners, particularly those who have little contact with their teachers, have to cope with a number of issues. They do not only have to find out by trial and error which strategies work for them; but they also have to learn the skills of assessing their individual learning needs, including their strengths and weaknesses as learners so that they can address them and monitor their progress. Thus, they have to be "self-aware and knowledgeable about their own perceptions, attitudes and abilities."

The purpose of this study is to explore factors that may enhance Virtual English language learning in Syria. In particular, because of the apparent contribution of learning strategies to foreign language acquisition, it is the aim of this study to examine the learning strategies used in this particular context.

1.2 Language learning strategies and language proficiency

There is evidence in the research that link language proficiency with strategy use (e.g., Green and Oxford, 1995; Khaldieh, 2000; Wharton,

2000). Some studies have linked increased proficiency with greater strategy use. However in others, there have also been results that suggest that the relationship is more complex than a simple linear correspondence between developing proficiency and strategy use, and depends to a large extent on the type of strategy employed. Chen (1990), for example, found that more proficient learners actually used fewer communication strategies, though they used them more effectively than less proficient students. That is why this study shall attempt to examine whether a relationship exists between the SVU students' language learning strategies and their level of language proficiency.

1.3 Language learning strategies and teachers' perceptions

Research suggests that teachers are generally not aware of their learners' language learning strategies (O'Malley et al.: 1985). Indeed, teachers may hold beliefs concerning their learners' strategy use which may be quite contrary to what their students report. One such example was when (Griffiths and Parr: 2001) used Oxford's (1990) well known Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL to study students' reported frequency of use of language learning strategies as well as teachers' perceptions of how often these strategy groups were used by their students. The results of that study revealed that students' and teachers' perceptions did not coincide at any point. Other researchers like Nunan (1988:93) also talks of 'clear mismatches between learners' and teachers' views'. Such mismatches, it is believed, might have a negative impact on the learning process. Griffiths' (2007) research, on the other hand, revealed a high level of accord (71%) between strategies students reported using highly frequently and those which teachers reported regarding as highly important.

Since the teachers' role in the classroom is pivotal and has a major impact on the teaching/learning process, the effect of teacher practices and perceptions is crucial; hence the importance of investigating teachers' perceptions of their learners' language learning strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1 Language learning at a distance

Learning a second language is generally perceived by students to be different from learning other subjects, and to involve more time, more practice and different mental processes' (Victori, 1992 cited in Cotterall, 1995:202). Sussex (1991 cited in White, 1994) contends that learning languages at a distance is more challenging than learning other subjects due to the complex combination of skills and information needed for language mastery.

Hauck and Hurd (2005:2) in their study of the relationship between language anxiety and learner self-management in distance learning contexts, maintain that "learning any subject in distance mode has its own specific challenges, not least the need to develop self-awareness and acquire good self-management skills as part of developing autonomy". They stress that "conscious selection of strategies and self-directed involvement are characteristics of an autonomous approach, and particularly relevant to those learning in independent contexts".

Chamot and O'Malley (1994) identify the kind of knowledge and skills that are mostly needed by those learning a language, particularly in a distance context. They state that such skills involve self-awareness and self-management – in other words – 'metacognition' which is about management as opposed to the process of learning.

White (1995) contends that the demands and opportunities of the distance learning context and the learners' need for self-direction compel them to re-evaluate their role(s) and responsibilities as language learners and to develop a comparatively higher degree of metacognitive knowledge, particularly self-knowledge. Her findings also reveal that distance learners make greater use of metacognitive strategies – particularly self-management – when compared with conventional classroom learning strategies.

2.2 Language learning strategies and metacognition

Language learning strategies have been linked with effective language learning (for example, Cohen, 1998; Green and Oxford, 1995;

Hsiao and Oxford, 2002; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). It is generally accepted that good language learners use strategies more frequently, and in a greater number of situations, than do weaker or less proficient learners (e.g., Ehrman and Oxford, 1990; Green and Oxford, 1995; Rubin, 1975).

Rubin (1975), who along with Stern (1975) was one of the first to undertake research in the area of learning strategies, describes language learning strategies as skills utilized by a learner to attain knowledge. According to O'Malley and Chamot, 1990 and Oxford, 1990, learning strategies are techniques consciously used by learners to improve their progress in acquiring, storing, retaining, recalling, and using information in the second or foreign language. White (1995) defines language learning strategies as the operations or processes which learners deploy to learn the target language. Cohen (1998:5) describes language learner strategies as constituting ''the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both''

A popular learning strategy inventory is Oxford's (1989) which is a list of learning strategies grouped according to six category taxonomy namely: Memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Chamot and O'Malley (1994) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) categorize learning strategies into three types: cognitive (applying a specific technique to a particular task, for example repetition, deductive reasoning, retrieval and rehearsal), metacognitive (executive processes used to plan, monitor and evaluate a learning task) and socio-affective (interacting with others for practice or to combat isolation or anxiety). But they highlighted those strategies classed as metacognitive, stressing that ''students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions'' (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 8).

The identification and classification of such approaches as metacognitive draws on Flavell (1976:232) who defines metacognition in terms of both skills and knowledge. Metacognitive *knowledge* is ''the knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or

anything related to them'' and metacognitive *skills* are ''the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes''. i.e the ability to carry out the planning, monitoring and evaluation that constitute self-regulation. With regard to language learning, Victori and Lockhart (1995:224) define metacognitive knowledge as "the general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching". Dickinson (1992:19) highlights the skills aspect, and talks in terms of 'the executive', because the strategies concerned with the application of metacognition are used "to manage or control the learning process". Hurd (2000:64), maintains that both aspects – knowledge and skills – "would seem to be of particular relevance to distance language learners: (1) metacognitive knowledge because of the power of such knowledge to affect the learning process, a major consideration for those learning on their own; and (2) metacognitive skills because of their emphasis on planning, monitoring and control of learning. For distance learners, left to a large extent to their own devices, it could be that metacognitive knowledge and the development of metacognitive skills are not only an essential part of effective learning but also a pre-requisite to it."

Chamot and O'Malley (1994:372) suggest that on the basis of information to date, "metacognition" [. . .] "may be the major factor in determining the effectiveness of individuals' attempts to learn another language" and that conclusions about strategic differences between good and bad language learners appear to suggest that explicit metacognitive knowledge about task characteristics and appropriate strategies for task solution is a major determiner of language learning effectiveness According to Hurd et al (2001), metacognitive knowledge is also involved in monitoring, which Wenden (1999:437) describes as ''the regulatory skill that oversees the learning process that follows the initial planning. It is the basis for determining how one is progressing, and it is what constitutes the internal feedback i.e. the state of awareness which lets the learner know that he/she has encountered a problem''. They proceed to say that the essential link between metacognition and strategic competence is elaborated by Bachman and Palmer (1996) (quoted in Cohen 1998:14) who describe strategic competence as ''a set of

metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher-order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use''.

Wenden (1991: 15) also connects learner autonomy to success in language learning. She maintains that "'successful' or 'expert' or 'intelligent' learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous."

Hauck (2005) takes this notion a step further to include online learners. She contends that the degree to which language learners are aware of both themselves - their attitudes, aptitudes and beliefs – and of the affordances of the learning environment, and the degree to which they demonstrate control and flexibility in the use of metacognitive strategies such as self-management are interdependent.

Learning strategies, therefore, have their place in the process of learning and there seems to be a consensus amongst leading researchers in the field like Brown and Palinscar, 1982; Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990; and Ridley, 1997 in support of the claim made by O'Malley and Chamot (1993:105) that ''individuals who take a more strategic approach learn more rapidly and effectively than individuals who do not. . .''.

Now that the importance of strategic competence and metacognitive strategies have been established, the next step is to investigate the SVU language learners' use of these strategies. However, investigations taking virtual language learning contexts into account are scant and to our knowledge no such study had taken place on virtual language learners in Syria.

3. Research questions

The specific questions addressed in this research are:

1. What types of learning strategies do the SVU English language learners report using and how frequent is their use of these strategies?

2. What associations, if any, exist between the SVU students' language learning strategies and their language proficiency?
3. How do the SVU English language teachers' reported perceptions of the importance of language learning strategies correspond with learners' overall reported frequency of strategy use?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

257 SVU English language students participated in this study. Data was collected from students from all five levels of proficiency: elementary, lower-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced. At the SVU, learners' proficiency is determined by the results of a placement test used by the University and upon which all students are distributed to the five different levels of proficiency.

The data collected from the student participants was distributed amongst the different levels as follows: 22 students from the elementary level, 56 from the lower-intermediate level, 62 from the intermediate level, 66 from the upper intermediate level and 51 students from the advanced level.

Dat was also collected from all 24 SVU English language tutors.

4.2. Instruments

4.2.1. Learners' questionnaire

The learners' research questionnaire was dispatched through emails in the last two weeks of the term of Spring 09 to all English language students from all five levels, which constituted 608 students. The timing was specifically chosen to ensure that students still remember well the kinds of strategies that they have been using during the whole term which extended from July to October 2009. 257 questionnaires were returned, representing an overall contribution rate of 42%. The questionnaire constituted fifteen questions investigating the use of fifteen different language learning strategies. In the design of this study, no differentiation was made between types of strategies, but the strategies under scrutiny

were mainly those classed as cognitive and metacognitive, even though the distinction between the two is not always that clear. The questionnaire drew heavily on a similar research instrument that was utilized by Hurd (2000) and Hurd and Xiao (2006) on distant language learners, but was adapted to fit the virtual learning context at the SVU.

The questionnaire was dispatched in Arabic to exclude the possibility of any misunderstanding on the part of the students. Students were asked how often they used each of the fifteen strategy items. All fifteen items in the questionnaires were designed for a 5-Likert scale response in terms of frequency of use ranging from ''Always'' to ''never''.

4.2.2. Teachers' questionnaire

The teachers' research questionnaire was also dispatched through emails to all 24 English language tutors from all five levels after the term of Spring 09 was over. The number of tutors in each level was as follows: 1 from the elementary level, 4 from the lower-intermediate level, 7 from the intermediate level, 7 from the upper-intermediate level, and 5 from the advanced level. All 24 tutors returned back the filled questionnaire representing a contribution of 100%.

The items on the tutors' questionnaire were the same strategy statements that were used to survey the students' use of strategies. However, the wording of the questionnaire was adapted to address the importance of the use of the strategy from the tutor's point of view. Tutors were asked to rate the items using a 5-point Likert scale in terms of importance from "not important at all" to "very important".

4.3. Data analysis

After data collection, the information from the questionnaires was entered onto excel sheets to enable data analysis to be carried out. The average reported frequency of language learning strategy use across all 257 students from all five levels was calculated for each strategy item from each level and for strategy use overall.

In order to explore patterns of strategy use by higher and lower level students, the sample was divided into two groups: the lower level group included the elementary and lower intermediate students (N 78), and the higher level group included the mid-intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced students (N 179). The average reported frequency of language

learning strategy use for each strategy item was calculated for both the low and the high proficiency level groups.

The data obtained from the teachers' questionnaires (N 24) were also analyzed and averages were calculated in order to determine the average level of importance ascribed by teachers to each strategy item. These results were then compared with results from the students' data.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Students' overall use of language learning strategies

In terms of students' overall strategy use, table 1 gives a whole picture of the ranking order of the students' reported use of learning strategies. Eleven out of the fifteen items in the questionnaire were reported to have been used by over 50% of the overall number of respondents from all five levels. Three out of those eleven strategies, though, were used by just over 50% of the subjects. But overall, these findings may be evidence that the SVU English language learners are employing a good number of learning strategies to enhance their learning.

A detailed review of each of the items in the questionnaire reveals that the strategy cited most frequently, a cognitive one, was "**Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way**" **(83.4%).** This finding is similar to Hurd's (2000) findings from a similar research on Open University learners of French where the same strategy ranked in second place. Data from both studies seem to support the view that distant language learners do not find sufficient opportunities for oral practice, though the case is slightly different in the Syrian context of the virtual learning environment. In Syria where English is learnt as a foreign language and where it is not used as a medium of communication outside the classroom, students seem to appreciate more the role of communication in the learning of languages. Added to that is the fact that at the SVU, the Internet does not always support live interaction between tutors and their learners and the tutor is usually the one who speaks for most of the time whilst learners respond mainly in writing. Hence, one would understand the SVU language learners' concern with making the most out of opportunities for communication in the foreign language.

Respondents also demonstrated a strong awareness of the importance of repetition to the process of learning**.** This was apparent in the students' choice of the cognitive strategy "**Repeat words and phrases out loud"**

(71.4%) which was the third frequently cited strategy**.** Hurd (2000) found similar results in her investigation of Open University language learning strategies where this strategy ranked first. Both findings are in line with a study carried out by O'Malley and Chamot (1993:80) among beginner and intermediate language learners where both groups were found in favour of "repetitions as the most frequently used strategy". Therefore, this study supports earlier findings of the significance of 'repetition' in the learning of languages. Besides, the need of online distant learners to vocalize the newly learnt foreign words and phrases seem also to be an important strategy in the virtual medium of instruction where learners get fewer chances to practice speaking.

Strategies used by SVU students	***Overall percentage (257 Students)***
Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way.	83.4 % (1)
Allow time for checking and double checking your assignments before sending them off .	78.6 % (2)
Repeat words and phrases out loud	71.4 % (3)
Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration	70.4 % (4)
Use ideas from the course materials	66.4 % (5)
Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself	66 % (6)
Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them	65.8 % (7)
Note down vocabulary from English radio/TV/films	60.6 % (8)
Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help	56 % (9)
Keep a log of all course-based activities that have been completed	55 % (10)
Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve.	54.8 % (11)
Keep a separate diary of your progress	45.4 % (12)
Create your own language exercises / activities	40.4 % (13)
Play word games/use mnemonics/make mind maps	40.2 % (14)
Record yourself speaking	27 % (15)

Table 1. Overall percentage of learning strategies used by SVU students from all five levels of proficiency
(Data in parentheses represent the rank order of the responses)

Another cognitive strategy frequently used by SVU students was "**Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration" (70.4%)** ranking fourth. It is implicit in this finding that note-taking is one of the common strategies utilized by students to overcome the feeling of isolation that is characteristic of the distant mode of learning. The findings on the two cognitive strategies that support the learning of vocabulary "**Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself" (66%)** and **"Note down vocabulary from English radio/TV/films" (60.6%)** were rather high too and ranked sixth and eighth respectively. These findings are in line with McDonough's (1999:9) findings on the importance of vocabulary strategies, which he reports as "central to all other language use situations".

So far, results indicate that SVU learners' major concerns are with oral practice, vocabulary building and maintaining concentration. All of which are essential learning strategies in an isolated medium like their virtual learning environment.

A less frequently cited cognitive strategy was **"Keep a log of all course-based activities that had been completed" (55%).** Though this strategy was used by just over 50% of the respondents, yet it points to the fact that SVU language learners are not attending much to the skills of self-monitoring and organization. In a context where it is usually the responsibility of the teacher to take care of most of the planning and monitoring, this finding is not unusual.

Three cognitive strategies were not so popular and were used by less than 50% of SVU informants. The first two were: "**Create your own language exercises/activities" (40.4%)** and **"Play word games/use mnemonics/make mind maps" (40.2%)** which ranked just before last in the thirteenth and fourteenth places respectively**.** The unpopularity of these two strategies amongst SVU learners might be an indicator that learners are focusing more on the mechanical and productive skills rather than the creative and reflective ones. The cognitive strategy least used and ranking in fifteenth place was **"Record yourself speaking" (27%).** Comparing this finding with that of Hurd's (2000) Open University findings where this strategy ranked seventh, it would seem that SVU learners are not fully aware of the potential of this strategy in the developing of their oral communicative skills. Besides, this strategy was

also the only one amongst all fifteen strategies that showed a steady decrease in use as students progressed from lower to higher levels. The findings on the last three items mentioned so far may indicate that to the minds of learners there are some strategies that are thought to be more appropriate for beginners than for more advanced learners. Such strategies are the ones that have to do with playing games, creating exercises and recording oneself. This point will be revisited in the section on teachers' perceptions of the importance of learning strategies.

In terms of metacognitive strategies – setting priorities, managing time and reflecting – "**Allow time for checking and double checking your assignments before sending them off" (78.6%)** was the most frequently cited strategy ranking second. Similarly, it ranked third with Hurd's (2000) Open University learners. Assessment therefore, seems to be high up on the list of priorities of distance learners. It is worth mentioning here that the strategies that ranked in the first three places were more or less the same for both the Syrian Virtual University and the British Open University cohorts. The focus of both groups seems to be mainly on the development of oral skills and on the revision of assessed assignments. This calls for further intercultural research as it appears that priorities for distance language learners seem to be the same regardless of their cultural background.

Other strategies cited quite frequently by SVU learners were **"Use ideas from the course materials" (66.4%)**, ranking fifth and **"Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them"(65.8%)** ranking seventh. These were followed in ninth place by the less frequently used reflective strategy of **"Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help" (56%).** Here, it seems clear that SVU learners are not well aware of the importance of the strategy of self-monitoring and seeking help. In eleventh place came the strategy **"Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve" (54.8%).** This finding might also be an indicator that learners are not prioritizing well in a medium where organization and prioritizing are crucial to success. It is worth mentioning here that the only strategy that involved time management and was frequently used by SVU respondents was the

one that had to do with assessment and grades. Marks in this context are therefore the major incentive for self-management and planning.

Finally, the least used metacognitive strategy was **"Keep a separate diary of your progress" (45.4%)** which ranked twelfth. Surprisingly, this strategy was used more by beginning learners than by advanced ones. Again, this finding may support the claim made concerning the three other least used cognitive strategies mentioned above (in thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth places) and that is such strategies are not popular amongst mature learners. More interesting is the finding by Hurd (2000) where none of the Open University students used this metacognitive strategy. Yet, Hurd (2000:73) emphasized the value of the "learner diary in fostering self-awareness and helping in the development of metacognitive behaviours".

Overall, results clearly indicate that SVU English language learners are employing a number of learning strategies. Findings demonstrate that the means for the students' overall strategy use, regardless of level of proficiency, was over 50% in eleven out of the fifteen strategies (see Table 1). This may be an indicator of the learner's appreciation of the use of strategies in such a mode of instruction as it may also be a sign that SVU language learners are on their way to autonomy. As such findings from this study are consistent with the results of other language learning strategy studies which show that L2 learners from different cultural backgrounds use language learning strategies in an apparent attempt to become effective learners of the English language (for example, Carson and Longhini, 2002; Cohen, 1990; Hsiao and Oxford, 2002; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Rubin,1975).

5.2 Strategy use and level of proficiency

Reports on strategy use from the low and high proficiency groups were compared to check whether there exists any relationship between proficiency levels and reported strategy use. Table 2 presents details on these findings.

The detailed breakdown of the percentage results by proficiency revealed a general trend of an increase in students' use of some strategies and a decrease in their use of other strategies as their proficiency

increased. More specifically, seven items (5 cognitive and 2 metacognitive) were reportedly used at a higher rate of frequency and six items (2 cognitive and 4 metacognitive) were used at a lower rate. However, the increase was mainly on those strategies that students overall reported using more and the decrease was mainly on those strategies that students overall reported using less. The two remaining strategies stayed constant and showed hardly any change in frequency of use between the low and the high proficiency groups. .

Strategies used by SVU students	***(%) of Levels 1 & 2 (78 students)***	***(%) of Levels 3, 4 & 5 (179 students)***	***Trend***
Repeat words and phrases out loud	60.5 % (7)	78.7 % (2)	↗
Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way.	73 % (2)	90.3 % (1)	↗
Allow time for checking and double checking your assignments before sending them off .	81.5 % (1)	76.7 % (3)	↘
Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself	62 % (5)	68.7 % (7)	↗
Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve.	57 % (10)	53 % (10)	↘
Use ideas from the course materials	62.5 % (4)	69 % (6)	↗
Record yourself speaking	45 % (14)	15 % (15)	↘
Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help	61 % (6)	52.7 % (11)	↘
Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them	55.5 % (11)	72.7 % (4)	↗
Note down vocabulary from English radio/TV/films	58 % (8)	62 % (8)	↗
Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration	68 % (3)	72 % (5)	↗
Keep a log of all course-based activities that have been completed	54.5 % (13)	55.3 % (9)	«
Play word games/use mnemonics/make mind maps	41.5 % (15)	39.3 % (12)	«
Create your own language exercises / activities	55.5 % (11)	30.3 % (14)	↘
Keep a separate diary of your progress	58 % (8)	37 % (13)	↘

Table 2. Percentage of strategy use by students from low and high proficiency levels
(Data in parentheses represent the rank order of the responses)

As for the strategies that were used more, they were five and they were mainly cognitive and again they were those concerned with practice opportunities and note-taking. The other two were metacognitive strategies and had to do with reflection and using ideas from course materials. The highest rate of frequency increase observed (around 18%) was in the cognitive skills of **'Repeat words and phrases out loud',** and **'Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way'** and the metacognitive skill of **'Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them'.** The findings on the latter may indicate that as students matured they seemed to value more the importance of self-reflection. The rate of frequency increase on the rest of the items was not as significant with around 4 - 6% increase on the cognitive strategies of **'Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself', 'Note down vocabulary from English radio/TV/films',** and **'Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration'** and the metacognitive skill of **'Use ideas from the course materials'.** On the whole, the increase in the use of strategies was mainly concerned with the cognitive strategies especially those that focused on the mechanical and productive skills.

As for those strategies that learners reported using less, they were mainly concerned with the metacognitive strategies of 'prioritizing', 'time management', and 'self-monitoring'. This is contrary to one's expectations, as one would think that as learners become more experienced, they would become more capable of taking charge of their own learning. Nevertheless, there may be other factors at play here. It may be that the traditional role of the teacher as the one who steers the whole learning process is having its effect on the learners' choice of learning strategies.

The use of the two strategies of **"Keep a log of all course-based activities that had been completed"** and "**Playing word games, using mnemonics, and making mind maps**" which were amongst those least used remained more or less stable even as students progressed in language competency. This again might be an indicator that students from all levels do not favour the use of such strategies regardless of their proficiency.

Therefore, it would seem that the general pattern emergent from the literature (e.g., Green and Oxford, 1995; Khaldieh, 2000; Wharton, 2000) that more proficient learners use more strategies, does not generally hold true for all strategies used by this cohort of SVU language learners. In other words, the general trend is not consistent with previous claims that the use of strategies increases with proficiency. This seems to apply more to some strategies than to others like the mechanical and productive skills as opposed to the reflective ones. Students do not seem to care much for the skills of prioritizing, monitoring and time and self-management for reasons that may be related to the central role that teachers play in the Syrian educational context.

5.3. Ranking of strategy use and level of proficiency

To check SVU learners' appreciation of the importance of these learning strategies, the ranking order of the reported use of each item was compared between high and low proficiency groups. Results (see table 2) point to a significant degree of similarity in the ranking order of both high and low proficiency group preferred strategies. The strategies students overall ranked highest, were similar to those ranked highest by the high and low proficiency groups. For instance, the strategy "**Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way**" ranked first (90.3 %) for the high proficiency group and second (73%) for the low proficiency one. The near 20% difference in use between the two groups may indicate that as learners progress, they become more aware of the magnitude of practice opportunities. Likewise, the strategy "**Allow time for checking and double checking your assignments before sending them off"** ranked first (81.5%) for the low proficiency group and third (76.7%) for the high proficiency one. Here, there is not much difference in the use of this strategy. To both groups, allocating sufficient time for revising assignments is equally important.

Similarly, the ranking was identical for two of the items that SVU learners reported as less important. The first was the strategy **"Note down vocabulary from English radio/TV/films"** which ranked eighth for both with (58%) for the low proficiency group and (62%) for the high proficiency ones. The second item was the strategy **"Set your priorities**

for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve" which ranked tenth for both groups with (57%) for the low proficiency group and (53%) for the high one. Findings were also very close for the least used strategy of **"Record yourself speaking"** which ranked fourteenth (45%) for the lower proficiency group and fifteenth (15%) for the higher proficiency one. The latter showing the biggest drop in use between the low proficiency group and the high one.

Minimal differences were found in most of the remaining items. The strategies: "**Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself"** ranked fifth (62%) for lower proficiency students and seventh (68.7%) for the higher proficiency ones; **"Use ideas from the course materials"** ranked fourth (62.5%) for lower proficiency groups and sixth (69%) for higher proficiency groups; and finally the strategy "**Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration"** ranked third (68%) for lower proficiency groups and fifth (72%) for higher proficiency ones.

On the other hand, the biggest difference in the ranking of the strategies was noticed in the strategy "**Repeat words and phrases out loud"** which ranked second (78.7%) for the high proficiency group but seventh (60.5%) for the low proficiency one. This may indicate that as students develop in proficiency they become more aware of the value of this strategy. The strategy **"Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them"** again showed a much greater use as students progressed from lower to higher levels of proficiency rising from only (55.5%) in low proficiency groups to (72.7%) in higher ones. This again may be further evidence that as students gain more experience in the new mode of learning they become more self-reflective. The strategy **"Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help"** ranked sixth (61%) for the lower proficiency group and eleventh (52.7%) for the higher proficiency ones. The drop in the use of this strategy, might indicate that as students become more experienced in distance learning they become more independent and thus seek less help. Similarly, the use of the strategy **"Keep a separate diary of your progress"** dropped from (58%) amongst lower proficiency groups to (37%) amongst higher

proficiency ones. Reasons behind this latter change may lie in the tutors' perceptions of the importance of this strategy.

5.4 Teachers and their perceptions of the importance of language learning strategies

Findings on teachers' perceptions of the importance of language learning strategies are displayed in Table 3. Comparing English language teachers' perceptions of the degree of importance of language learning strategies with those strategies reported to have been used frequently by SVU learners point to a remarkable overlap. Teachers reported

Strategies perceived by SVU tutors as important	**Not important at all**	**Not important**	**No opinion**	**Important**	**Very important**
Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way.	0%	0%	0%	17%	83% (1)
Allow time for checking and double checking your assignments before sending them off .	0%	0%	0%	25%	75% (2)
Use ideas from the course materials	0%	4%	8%	33%	54% (3)
Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration	0%	8%	4%	38%	50% (4)
Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them	0%	4%	17%	38%	42% (5)
Note down vocabulary from English	0%	4%	13%	42%	42% (5)

radio/TV/films					
Repeat words and phrases out loud	0%	17%	0%	50%	33% (7)
Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself	0%	17%	8%	42%	33% (7)
Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help	0%	0%	8%	63%	29% (9)
Keep a log of all course-based activities that have been completed	0%	8%	17%	54%	21% (10)
Play word games/use mnemonics/make mind maps	0%	8%	29%	42%	21% (10)
Record yourself speaking	0%	17%	13%	54%	17% (12)
Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve.	0%	4%	21%	58%	17% (12)
Keep a separate diary of your progress	0%	13%	38%	38%	13% (14)
Create your own language exercises / activities	0%	25%	50%	21%	4% (15)

Table 3. Teachers perceptions' of the importance of language learning strategies

(Data in parentheses represent the rank order of the responses)

ascribing a high level of importance to thirteen out of the fifteen language learning strategies in the questionnaire. Their appreciation of the value of the learning strategies was most apparent in the finding where all 24 tutors said that 0% of the fifteen strategies is not important at all.

As concerns the items which the SVU language teachers thought of as unimportant, 25% of the tutors thought that the strategy "**Create your own language exercises/activities"** was unimportant. Around 20% also believed that the strategies: "**Repeat words and phrases out loud",** "**Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself",** and **"Record yourself speaking"** were unimportant. Similarly, 13% of SVU tutors said that **"Keep a separate diary of your progress"** is not an important strategy either**.** Findings point to a high accord between students reported minimal use of these strategies and tutors' perceptions of their less significant value, except for the strategy of **'Repeat words and phrases out loud'** which students' overall reported using it rather frequently (ranking third). The latter finding may point to the fact that tutors, in this mode of learning, are not well aware of their learners' need to vocalize words and phrases. Most SVU tutors come with little experience in teaching online and hence are unaware of the restricting nature of the online distant environment especially in as far as the development of the skill of speaking is concerned.

Moreover, there were some uncertainties too amongst tutors concerning the importance of some strategies like "**Create your own language exercises/activities"** where 50% of teachers were unsure about its value to learning. Likewise, almost 40% of tutors were unsure about the importance of the strategy **"Keep a separate diary of your progress".** Its impact on self-reflection and hence learning is not clear to the minds of a good number of tutors. Around 30% of tutors also did not appreciate the significance of the strategy of "**Playing word games, using mnemonics, and making mind maps**". These findings match very well with the students' least used strategies. This means that students are not using these strategies not because they do not want to, but because they have not been made aware of their significance neither through the teaching materials nor through their tutors whom they believe to be their major resource to learning. Around 20% of tutors as well were unsure

about the significance of the strategies **"Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve", "Keep a log of all course-based activities that had been completed",** and **"Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them".** A point worth mentioning here is that both SVU learners and teachers seemed to underestimate the value of reflection in the process of learning, though more so on the part of the students than on the part of teachers. All in all, these findings explain the reason behind the students' minimal use of these learning strategies.

The only two strategies which tutors had no doubts whatsoever about their high importance were the strategies "**Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way**" and "**Allow time for checking and double checking your assignments before sending them off".** These two were reported to have been used most by the majority of the students. Hence, the remarkable agreement between students' reported use of strategies and tutors' perceptions of the importance of those strategies.

Comparing the ranking of the percentage of the overall strategy use of strategies from all levels with teachers' ranking of the highly important strategies, it is clear that the ranking of both is amazingly similar. For instance, teachers ranked the cognitive strategy "**Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way**" (83%) first just the same as the ranking of their learners. Similarly, the metacognitive strategy of "**Allow time for checking and double checking your assignments before sending them off"** (75%) was ranked in second place by both teachers and learners. In fourth place, both teachers' and learners' choices matched again with the cognitive strategy "**Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration"** (50%).

What is also of significance is the remarkable matching in the findings concerning the strategies considered less important by tutors and reported to have been used least by learners. These were mainly the strategies ranked in the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth place and were mostly concerned with prioritizing, time management, creating exercises, playing games and recording oneself speaking. They were the same that were least used by students from different levels of proficiency.

Overall, results seem to imply that teachers and students are generally 'on the same wavelength' when it comes to reported student practices and teacher perceptions of importance regarding language learning strategy use. This finding is an encouraging discovery because of its implications of a good accord between students and teachers in this area and the potentially positive consequences in terms of classroom dynamics. Thus, students are indicating a preference for teacher-directed study. However, teachers do not seem to be encouraging their learners to take more responsibility for their own learning. This, in turn, may reflect the educational traditions of teachers which do not encourage learner independence in the language classroom. This is an area worthy of further research to investigate how such divergent expectations might be reconciled.

6. Conclusion

Findings indicate that virtual English language learners at the Syrian Virtual University do employ a number of language learning strategies to enhance their learning. However, they show distinct preferences for the mechanical and productive types of strategies like oral practice and vocabulary building as opposed to the strategies that involve self-reflection and management like planning, monitoring, and prioritizing. Learners at all levels typically seem to use the least sophisticated strategy, even when they have others available to them. This may be due to learners' feeling unconfident with some other strategies because of lack of practice.

Results also demonstrate that students in this study with higher proficiency English could be characterized as having invested more effort in making higher use of over 50% of the strategy items. Again, this was mainly concentrated on the use of the same productive and mechanical skills with slight inclination for using the skills of prioritizing and time management, still their focus was mainly on oral practice and vocabulary building. Thus, unlike previous research, this study did not find overall increased use of all types of language learning strategies among more proficient learners. It is also apparent that particular strategies may be culturally more appropriate, and therefore preferred, or it may be that the

educational experience of Syrian students leads them to prefer some strategies to others.

It is reassuring that this study has discovered so much common ground at the point of intersection between students' and teachers' perceptions regarding language learning strategies. Findings of this research suggest a remarkable agreement between students preferred practices and teacher perceptions of importance regarding language learning strategy use. There are few strategies where teacher perceptions of importance and student reported frequency of use are mismatched. This is encouraging in terms of implications for the efficacy of what goes on in the online session to have discovered that teachers report a strong awareness of the importance of language learning strategies, and that many of the strategies which students report using highly frequently are regarded as important by teachers. This finding, perhaps, reflect a growing awareness of the importance of language learning strategies in the language teaching and learning area generally. However, in this context of the virtual environment as in the conventional one, the teacher is still the one in control of the whole learning process. It is still the teacher's responsibility to plan, monitor and manage and that is why students overall use of these strategies is diminished.

Besides, in an EFL context like that of Syria, where from elementary school to university much of students' English language input comes from their teachers, some students might therefore think that a good teacher is probably better informed about the standard of English required by the institution and about choices of methods and strategies to learn English, and accordingly might regard the teacher as a resource which they should make full use of in order to learn English well. Therefore, there is a need to re-assess teacher perceptions regarding the strategies which are important for their students.

In terms of virtual English language learning in Syria, these results may be used in the future to inform pedagogy. For example, learning strategies should be incorporated into the online curriculum and the students should be explicitly taught how to use the strategies. Findings also highlight significant challenges for distance language course writers. Apart from developing communicative proficiency, course materials have a major role in enhancing learners' capacity for critical reflection and

autonomy by developing metacognitive strategies and involving learners in choices about their learning. For distance learning, any attempts at pedagogic intervention to promote autonomy through the use and transfer of strategies must take place via the materials and tutor feedback on assignments, as attendance at tutorials is optional and cannot therefore be guaranteed. For this reason, Virtual language courses should contain sections on learning strategies and study skills, language awareness activities and practical guidance in the development of specific language skills. Students should also be encouraged to experiment with a range of strategies to determine which works best for them (Hurd et al.: 2001). Learners need opportunities to try them out and become confident in using them in order to be able to make meaningful choices as part of the process of 'autonomization'. This is particularly pertinent given that English is an important educational requirement in Syria today.

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