

ISSN 0976 - 8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed  
Open Access e-Journal**

**Vol. XI, Issue -4 (August 2020)**

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**ISSN 2278-9529**  
**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## LLS Use and Writing Proficiency of Assamese ESL Learners

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**Article History:** Submitted-03/07/2020, Revised-16/08/2020, Accepted-17/08/2020, Published-31/08/2020.

### **Abstract:**

This paper studies the relationship of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) use and writing proficiency. Four hundred and fifty undergraduate Assamese ESL learners from three colleges of Dibrugarh University, Assam participated in the study. The aim of the paper is to investigate the relationship of Assamese ESL Learner's use of LLS and proficiency in writing summary and essay in English. A Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) based questionnaire is used to identify learner's use of LLS and a writing activity questionnaire is used to measure learner's proficiency in writing. The participants answered the instruments at the beginning of the experiment. It was then followed by LLS instruction for four weeks and a post-test on the same questionnaires. The Pearson's correlation analysis revealed mixed results in the pre-test context. But in the post-test significant positive correlation between the use of all the six types of LLS categories and learner's proficiency in writing summary and essay in English was discovered. The study recommends that LLS instruction should be integrated in the undergraduate ESL classrooms to increase learner's writing proficiency in English.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategies, LLS and Writing Proficiency, Assamese ESL Learners, ELT.

### **Introduction**

English is learned as a second or associate language in the educational institutions from primary level of education in Assam. The English language requirement received additional momentum in the recent years, with the liberalisation of Indian economy in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Adequate proficiency in English became unavoidable requirement for better economic and social status. There is therefore, an ever-growing demand for the language in the society. Parents bestow greater emphasis on making their children learn the

language right from early childhood. As a result, learning of English has become a part and parcel of today's education. Motivation for learning the language is also quite favourable in the society. Mushrooming growth of a large number of private English medium schools in every nook and corner of the state in the recent years is the indication of the importance that the society is paying on English language education and also education through English language. However, despite having a strong positive requirement for learning English, a large section of Assamese ESL learners display proficiency below expected level even at the undergraduate levels.

This aspect of disparity in learning a language has been a subject of research for language educators and researchers all over the world. Modern researches in the field of language learning have been providing insights into how the learners of a language approach the learning of a language. It has been pointed out that learning a language is a complex cognitive process. It is a type of problem solving for which learners use different LLS. 'Language learning strategies are specific methods or techniques used by individual learners to facilitate the comprehension, retention, retrieval and application of information for language learning and acquisition' (Oxford, 1990). In a nutshell, LLS are 'operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information...; specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations' (Oxford, 1990:8). Therefore LLS are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of language learning. An important area of investigation in the field of LLS research is to understand the relationship of LLS with proficiency. A considerable number of studies have investigated the relationship such as Lai (2009), Salahshour, Sharifi & Salahshour (2013) Hasan & Paramasivam (2016), Alfian (2018) etc.

Lai (2009) conducted a study to investigate language learning strategies used by 418 EFL learners in Taiwan and looked for relationships between learning strategy use and the patterns of strategy use based on language proficiency. The results indicated that proficiency level has a significant effect on strategy choice and use. In other words, more proficient learners used more learning strategies.

Salahshour, Sharifi & Salahshour (2013) conducted a study on Iranian high school learners to explore the relationship between choice of learning strategies and English proficiency. The results indicated that proficient learners use significantly more strategy.

Hasan & Paramasivam (2016) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and English proficiency of 124 Kurdish pre-university

students. The researcher used Oxford's (1990) SILL, individual background questionnaire and a version of English Sunrise Test for the investigation. The results revealed that in addition to proficiency, learner's learning level also influence LLS use. More advanced level learners use greater number of strategies.

Alfian (2018) conducted a study to explore the relation between language proficiency level and language learning strategy choice of EFL learners at an Islamic university in Indonesia. A total of 284 Indonesian university students classified as high, medium, and low based on their proficiency levels completed the SILL questionnaires. The findings indicated a linear relationship between proficiency level and strategy use; the higher the proficiency level, the higher the number of strategies employed.

### **Hypothesis and Research Questions**

In the context of the above discussion, present study tries to investigate the relationship of Assamese ESL learner's writing proficiency with their use of LLS. Following hypothesis and research questions guided the present study.

Ho: There is no significant relationship between Assamese ESL learners' performance in specific types of English writing skill and the use of Language Learning Strategies (LLSs).

#### **Research Questions**

1. Is there any relationship between Assamese ESL learners' use of LLSs and their performance in specific types of English writing skill before LLSs training?
2. Is there any relationship between Assamese ESL learners' use of LLSs and their performance in specific types of English writing skill after LLSs training?

### **Methodology**

Four hundred and fifty undergraduate Assamese ESL learners from three colleges of Dibrugarh University, Assam, participated in the study. The age of the participants was 19 to 20 years at the time of the experiment. They had 10 to 12 years of English learning experience. The study used two instruments:

- a. A SILL (Oxford, 1990) based questionnaire to measure learner's use of LLS.
- b. A writing activity questionnaire to measure learner's proficiency in writing in English.

The SILL based questionnaire was developed from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Version 7.0). Oxford's SILL was intended for the

students of English as a second or foreign language. It contained fifty multiple choice items, each representing one strategy. The responses for all items were recorded in a five-point Likert scale:

- 1-Never or almost never true of me (means the statement is very rarely true of you);
- 2-Usually not true of me (means that the statement is true less than half the time);
- 3-Somewhat true of me (means that the statement is true of you about half the time);
- 4-Usually true of me (means that the statement is true more than half the time);
- 5-Always or almost always true of me (means that the statement is true of you almost always).

In the present study, some modifications were made to the SILL questionnaire. This was necessary because in the original version there were certain strategy items which were either unusual for the Assamese ESL learners of undergraduate level or specifically unrelated to this study. Therefore, some strategy items were removed, modified or added for the purposes of the present study. The final version of the questionnaire contained 42 strategy items. Table 1 presents the modifications of the Oxford's (1990) SILL.

Table 1: Modification of SILL

| Item | Part A<br>Memory Strategies   | Modification |
|------|---|--------------|
| 1    | I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.                               | No change    |
| 2    | I use new English words in a sentence so that I can remember them.  | No change    |
| 3    | I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.           | No change    |
| 4    | I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.              | No change    |
| 5    | I use rhymes to remember new English words.   | Removed      |
| 6    | I use flashcards to remember new English words.   | Removed      |
| 7    | I physically act out new English words.   | Removed      |
| 8    | I review English lessons often.   | No change    |
| 9    | I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign. | No change    |
|      | <b>Part B Cognitive Strategies</b>  |              |
| 10   | I say or write new English words several times.   | No change    |
| 11   | I try to talk like native English speakers.   | Removed      |
| 12   | I practice the sounds of English.   | No change    |
| 13   | I use the English words I know in different ways.   | No change    |
| 14   | I start conversations in English.   | Rephrased    |
| 15   | I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to the movies spoken in English.                            | No change    |
| 16   | I read for pleasure in English.   | No change    |

|  |  |           |
|--|--|-----------|
| 17                                     | I read as much as possible in English.   | Added     |
| 18                                     | I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English.  | No change |
| 19                                     | I first skim-read an English passage (read over the passage quickly), then go back and read carefully. | No change |
| 20                                     | I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.                          | No change |
| 21                                     | I try to find patterns in English  | Removed   |
| 22                                     | I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.                     | No change |
| 23                                     | I try not to translate word for word.  | No change |
| 24                                     | I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.  | No change |
| <b>Part C Compensation Strategies</b>  |  |           |
| 25                                     | To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.  | No change |
| 26                                     | When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.                         | Removed   |
| 27                                     | I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.  | No change |
| 28                                     | I read English without looking up every new word.  | No change |
| 29                                     | I try to guess what the other person will say next.  | Rephrased |
| 30                                     | If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.                 | No change |
| <b>Part D Metacognitive Strategies</b> |  |           |
| 31                                     | I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.   | No change |
| 32                                     | I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.                            | No change |
| 33                                     | I pay attention when someone is speaking English.  | No change |
| 34                                     | I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.   | No change |
| 35                                     | I plan my schedule so that I will have enough time to study English.                                   | No change |
| 36                                     | I look for people I can talk to in English.  | Removed   |
| 37                                     | I plan out in advance how I am going to read a text.   | Added     |
| 38                                     | I look for opportunities to read and write as much as possible in English.                             | No change |
| 39                                     | I have clear goals for improving my English skills.  | No change |
| 40                                     | I think about my progress in learning English.   | No change |
| <b>Part E Affective Strategies</b>     |  |           |
| 41                                     | I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.  | No change |
| 42                                     | I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.                         | Rephrased |
| 43                                     | I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.   | Removed   |
| 44                                     | I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.                                 | No change |
| 45                                     | I write down my feelings in a language learning diary  | Removed   |
| 46                                     | I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.                                    | No change |
| <b>Part F Social Strategies</b>        |  |           |
| 47                                     | If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.      | No change |
| 48                                     | I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.  | Removed   |
| 49                                     | I practice English with other students.  | No change |
| 50                                     | I ask for help from English speakers.  | No change |
| 51                                     | I ask questions in English.  | No change |

|    |   |           |
|----|---|-----------|
| 52 | I try to learn about the culture of English speakers. | No change |
|----|---|-----------|

The strategy items 5, 6, 7, 21, 43 and 45 were removed as they were unusual for the target group of learners. On the other hand, strategy items 11, 26, 36 and 48 were removed as they were unrelated to the focus of this study. The strategy items 14, 29, and 42 were rephrased in the context of the present study. Item 14 was rephrased as “If I have anything to write, I start in English”, item 29 as “I try to guess what will come next when I read” and item 42 was rephrased as “I encourage myself to read and write in English even when I am afraid of making a mistake”. Items 17 and 37 were added to the questionnaire because they were important strategies for reading and writing skills. Another modification made was to include response boxes along with the strategy items in the questionnaire instead of providing separate response sheet. This was done in order to make it convenient for the participants to respond to the strategy items.

The writing activity questionnaire was an instrument designed to test the participants’ writing proficiency in English. Learners’ proficiency in writing skill was assessed with the help of two summary writing activities and an essay writing activity incorporated in the writing activity questionnaire. The learners’ were asked to write summaries of two given passages. Topics for the essay writing activity were selected from TOEFL (2005). These included topics of general interest of learners which help in the assessment of learners’ ability for descriptive and argumentative writing. There were four options for the essay writing task. The questionnaire contained space in it for writing the summaries and the essay.

## Results and Findings

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant relationship between Assamese ESL learners’ performance in specific types of English writing skill and the use of Language Learning Strategies (LLSs).

Results for the research questions:

1. Is there any relationship between Assamese ESL learners’ use of LLSs and their performance in specific types of English writing skill before LLSs training?

The correlation analysis in Table 2 shows that in the pre-test stage there is significant ( $p < .01$ ) positive correlation between the use of cognitive, compensation and social strategies and the experimental groups’ score in summary writing.

Table 2: Essay and Summary Writing Scores and LLSs Use in Pre-test

|                 |                     | Total Memory Strategies | Total Cognitive Strategies | Total Compensation Strategies | Total Metacognitive Strategies | Total Affective Strategies | Total Social Strategies |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Summary Writing | Pearson Correlation | -.014                   | .668**                     | .527**                        | .029                           | -.077                      | .191**                  |
|                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .833                    | .000                       | .000                          | .666                           | .248                       | .004                    |
|                 | N                   | 225                     | 225                        | 225                           | 225                            | 225                        | 225                     |
| Essay Writing   | Pearson Correlation | -.134*                  | -.079                      | -.180**                       | -.099                          | -.064                      | -.262**                 |
|                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .045                    | .237                       | .007                          | .139                           | .342                       | .000                    |
|                 | N                   | 225                     | 225                        | 225                           | 225                            | 225                        | 225                     |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

On the other hand, there is significant ( $p < .05$ ) negative correlation between the use of memory strategies and the score in essay writing. Moreover, significant ( $p < .01$ ) negative correlation is also noticed between learners' score in essay writing and the use of compensation and social strategies.

2. Is there any relationship between Assamese ESL learners' use of LLSs and their performance in specific types of English writing skill after LLSs training?

Table 3 shows that there is significant ( $p < .01$ ) positive correlation between the use of all the strategy categories and experimental groups' score in summary and essay writing.

Table 3: Summary and Essay Writing Scores and LLSs Use in Post-test

|                 |                     | Total Memory Strategies | Total Cognitive Strategies | Total Compensation Strategies | Total Metacognitive Strategies | Total Affective Strategies | Total Social Strategies |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Summary Writing | Pearson Correlation | .567**                  | .609**                     | .669**                        | .366**                         | .473**                     | .519**                  |
|                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000                    | .000                       | .000                          | .000                           | .000                       | .000                    |
|                 | N                   | 225                     | 225                        | 225                           | 225                            | 225                        | 225                     |
| Essay Writing   | Pearson Correlation | .498**                  | .593**                     | .677**                        | .315**                         | .640**                     | .634**                  |
|                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000                    | .000                       | .000                          | .000                           | .000                       | .000                    |
|                 | N                   | 225                     | 225                        | 225                           | 225                            | 225                        | 225                     |

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Therefore, the statistical analysis has provided enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis and state that there is a significant positive relationship between Assamese ESL learners' performance in specific types of English writing skill and the use of LLSs.

## **Discussion**

A SILL based questionnaire was used to measure learner's use of LLS and a writing activity questionnaire was used to measure learner's proficiency in writing summary and essay in English. The instruction of LLS was quite successful because it increased LLS use through raising awareness among the participants regarding its usefulness in language learning. The findings indicated strong relationship of LLS and proficiency. In the pre-test context the relationship was mixed. But the statistical analysis in the post-test context indicated strong positive relationship of LLS use with writing proficiency of Assamese ESL learner. The findings indicated that learners with higher proficiency in writing summary and essay are also higher users of all the six categories of LLS. In other words, higher use of LLS is associated with higher proficiency level of undergraduate Assamese ESL learners. The finding supports the finding of Lai (2009), Salahshour, Sharifi & Salahshour (2013), Hasan & Paramasivam (2016), Alfian (2018) etc.

## **Conclusion**

The present study was conducted to investigate the relationship of LLS with writing proficiency of Assamese ESL learners. The findings revealed significantly strong relationship of LLS use with proficiency. It can therefore be recommended that LLS instruction should be incorporated in the ESL teaching learning situation in the undergraduate level in order to increase Assamese ESL learner's writing proficiency in English. Moreover, further studies of similar type should be conducted by inclusion of greater number subjects and variety of settings.

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