

# **English Language Majoring Students' Use of English Language Learning Strategies vs. their Academic Achievement: the Case of Hawassa University Students**

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**Abstract:** This research was meant to examine the correlation between English language majoring students' use of English language learning strategies and their academic achievement; it is a correlational study. To this end, sixty-one English language majoring students enrolled from 2012/13 to 2014/15 at Hawassa University were made to fill in a five-point scale questionnaire intended to obtain data on their use of each of the six groups of the language learning strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social), and their CGPA (Cumulative Grade Average Point) was obtained from the university's Registrar and Alumni Affairs Directorate. The correlations were examined through Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient ( $r$ ). To determine the strength of a correlation, the cut-off points suggested by Cohen were applied. Moreover, coefficient of determination was computed to see the extent to which the students' use of the learning strategies predicts their CGPA. Pearson  $r$  demonstrated that there is a strong positive correlation between the English language majoring students' use of each of the six groups of English language learning strategies and their academic achievement ( $r$ -values  $> .949$ ,  $p$ -value =  $.000$ ). The coefficient of determination also revealed that the students' use of the learning strategies predicts their academic achievement by  $> 90.0601\%$ . Based on the findings, recommendations have been made.

**Keywords:** English language, majoring, use, learning strategies, correlation, academic achievement

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background to the Study**

English language is a popular lingua franca. A lingua franca can be defined as "a language used as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different" (Soanes and Stevenson, 2006, p. 828). The people of the European Union member countries, for instance, use English besides their own languages. Globally, international and continental summits are held mainly in English. Moreover, English has become the predominant language of the print and electronic media across the globe. It has also taken the leading position as a language of science and technology that many of the academic papers are published in English. "It pervades and often dominates areas of global life ranging from technology, science and education to commerce, advertising and pop" (Pope, 2002, p. 19). The above scholars conclude that English continues to have a large number of speakers in the world. They justify that in many corners of the globe children raise up multilingual and thus English has become one of these languages. They add that as far as globalization is concerned English will continue as one of the main languages of the world.

The introduction of the English language into Ethiopia dates back to the introduction of modern education into the country (Dejenie, 1990). When the western education got into Ethiopia in the early nineteenth century, English was taught as a subject whereas French served as a medium of instruction. According to Tesfaye and Taylor (1976), cited in Geremew (1999), after the Italian invading force was driven out of Ethiopia with the help of the British army in 1941, the British influence in Ethiopia began to grow and as the result of that a shift was made from French domination to English domination.

The English language has played important roles in Ethiopia. For example, as far as international relations of the country are concerned, Ethiopia communicates with foreigners or nations mainly in English. English serves as the official language of the country next to Amharic. It serves as an official language for the international institutions of the country. Specifically, it is often the language of the international aid organizations, Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and African Union (AU). English also serves as the working language for some national institutions such as the Ethiopian Air Lines, banks, and Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation.

Business persons often use English to order commodities and other items from abroad. Moreover, these days, many hotels and supermarkets in our country, as a proof of payment, print bill receipts to customers in English. Furthermore, many public advertisements or announcements and road signposts and others, especially in towns and cities of the country, are written in English.

The English language has played different roles at different regimes in the case of Ethiopian education. Geremew (1999), quotes Tesfaye and Taylor (1976), says that after the Ethio-Italy war, English became the medium of instruction for the majority of subjects from Grade 3 onwards. That role, however, was taken by Amharic for Grades 3-6 as of 1963/4 to the downfall of the military government in 1991. The education policy of the present government has also stated that medium of instruction for Grades 1-6 should be mother tongue and thus this has also decreased the role of English. The use of English as a subject as well as a medium of instruction is not uniform across the country. In some regional states, it is taught as a subject at all levels starting from Grade 1, whereas in other regional states it starts from Grade 3. Again, in some regions it serves as a medium of instruction from Grade 3, whereas in others it starts from Grade 5 and Grade 8. Moreover, the English language has served as a medium of instruction in secondary schools, whereas Amharic and/or some regional or vernacular languages are offered as subjects.

The English language has got an important place especially in higher learning institutions of the country. It can be concluded that ninety-nine percent of the instructional materials and other reference resources of our higher education institutions appear in English. English is serving as a medium of instruction in our universities although some languages are currently becoming medium of instruction for students who study these languages. It has also continued to be a must to students, normally in their undergraduate first year studies, to take a good number of English language courses.

Moreover, almost in all the universities in the country, there is a Department of English that trains students for a bachelor's degree. The students are requested to take a number of English language courses. They take courses on grammar, the four macro-language skills, linguistics, literature, communication, etc. It takes three years (six semesters) to complete the program. The graduates are mainly expected to be English language teachers at secondary schools, translators, public relation officers, etc.

The literature widely discusses that students' use of the English language learning strategies improves their English language learning/proficiency. *Learning strategy* has been defined in various ways. Oxford (1990, p. 8) defines *learning strategy* as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations." Her definition is usually taken as a model definition because she is an authority and the definition also includes what are missed in the definitions of many scholars.

Classifications of learning strategies carried out at different times were based on different issues. The early taxonomy was based on the strategies good and poor language learners use. The current classification has been based on the direct/indirect contributions the strategies make for learning or on the level and type of information processed by learners when they use them. Oxford (1990) classifies learning strategies into two broad categories. Her classification is based on the role of the strategies for learning. Strategies that give direct contribution to students' learning are named as *direct* strategies and strategies that play indirect role are called *indirect* strategies. *Direct* learning strategies include *memory*, *cognitive* and *compensation* strategies and *indirect* learning strategies include *metacognitive*, *affective* and *social* strategies (Refer the table appended and shows the specific English language learning strategies that a student does as far as each of the six groups of the language learning strategies is concerned.). Oxford's (1990) classification of learning strategies is comprehensive, and thus has been used as the theoretical framework by many researchers such as Rahimi et al., 2008; Deneme, 2008; Vidal, 2002; Sasaki, 2000; Ellis, 1994 (cited in Alptekin, 2007).

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Scholars abroad have conducted studies meant to examine the relationship between English language learners' use of the English language learning strategies and their academic achievement (Fewell, 2010; Song, 2005; Griffiths, 2003; Wharton, 2000; O'Malley, et al., 1985). The researchers found that there is relationship between students' use of the learning strategies and their academic achievement. Students who regularly use different types of English language learning strategies are better achievers in their studies and the vice versa. That is, English language learners' academic achievement usually depends on their use of the English language learning strategies and how often they do so. This is because learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). On the other hand, successful learners often use the English language learning strategies more frequently and use them in an orchestrated fashion (Green & Oxford, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Chamot & Kupper, 1989). Hence, researchers have recommended that due attention should be given by concerned stakeholders to help students regularly use different types of English language learning strategies; as a result, their academic achievement would be improved.

However, nobody has so far studied the correlation between English language majoring students' use of the English language learning strategies and their academic achievement in Ethiopian context. The literature states that students' use of the target language learning strategies can be affected by specific cultural and educational contexts of a nation and by students' target language ability, age, gender, learning styles, and motivation and attitudes towards the target language.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

This research is intended to examine the correlation between English language majoring students' use of the English language learning strategies and their academic achievement. Specifically, the study is meant to examine the correlation between English language majoring students' use of each of the six groups of language learning strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social) and their academic achievement.

### **1.4 The Research Hypotheses**

The following null and alternative hypotheses were formulated about the correlation:

**Null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>)** - There is no correlation between English language majoring students' use of the English language learning strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social) and their academic achievement;

**Alternative hypothesis (H<sub>a</sub>)** - There is correlation between English language majoring students' use of the English language learning strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social) and their academic achievement.

## **II. METHODS AND MATERIALS**

### **The Research Design**

This research was intended to examine the correlation between English language majoring students' use of the English language learning strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social) and their academic achievement. It is a correlational study. The correlations were examined through Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r).

### **Description of Study Setting and Participants**

The researcher purposefully chose Hawassa University to which he is a member of staff, for he felt that conducting the study here would minimize the social, financial and time constraints that might hamper the results of the study. Hawassa University is a public university found in the South Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State of Ethiopia. It is a comprehensive university engaged in the provision of all-round education, research, training and community services.

School of Languages and Communication Studies is one of the schools under the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Hawassa University. The school was established in 2001 as the Department of Foreign Language and Literature under the Faculty of Social Sciences. Before its establishment as a department, it was serving as an English Unit under the Faculty of Basic Sciences and was offering common courses such as College English-I, College English-II, and Sophomore English. The name of the department has been changed into the School of Languages and Communication Studies since 2012 after launching MA program in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and BA program in Journalism and Communication. More recently, the school has opened BA programs in Sidama Language and Literature and in Chinese Language and MA programs in Journalism and Mass Communication and in Linguistics and Multicultural Studies.

Sixty-one English language majoring students enrolled from 2012/13 to 2014/15 at Hawassa University took part in the study. The number of males is 45, whereas the number of females is 16. The participants were between 18-24 years old; the majority of them were between 19-21 years old. Convenient sampling technique was used to include the participants. That is, only those students who were present in the classroom during the administration of the questionnaire took part in the study.

### **Adopting Questionnaire**

Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* questionnaire-Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) was adopted; Oxford is the authority of this questionnaire. It included items where each item has five possible responses: never or almost never true of me, usually not true of me, somewhat true of me, usually true of me, and always or almost always true of me. The questionnaire was intended to gather data on the students' use of the English language learning strategies. The *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* questionnaire is the most widely used tool for identifying students' language learning strategies and how often they tend to use the strategies (Oxford, 1990; Griffiths, 2003; Chamot, 2005; Alireza and Abdullah, 2010). The questionnaire has two versions. One is for *English Speakers Learning a New Language* and coded as 5.1. The

other version, which was chosen for this study, is for *Speakers of Other Languages Learning English* and is coded as 7.0 (ESL/EFL). "SILL Version 7.0, containing 50 items, is geared to students of English as a second or foreign language.... The language is very simplified....The SILL's 5-point scale (for all versions) ranges from "never or almost never" to "always or almost always" (Oxford, 1990, p. 199).

### Administering Questionnaire and Obtaining Students' CGPA

The participants were made to fill in the questionnaire meant to collect data on their use of the English language learning strategies. They had received a brief explanation about the aim of the study before they go on to fill in the questionnaire. Moreover, careful attempts were made to make the environment conducive to fill in the questionnaire. Furthermore, the CGPA of only those students who had filled in the questionnaire was obtained from the university's Registrar and Alumni Affairs Directorate.

### Methods of Data Analysis

In order to find the participants' scores on the questionnaire, the researcher applied the procedures employed by the prominent social science researchers (such as Hong et al., 2003; Evans, 2007; Knowles and Kerkman, 2007; Prokop et al., 2007; Barteau, 2009). Firstly, the items of the questionnaire were categorized into the six groups of the language learning strategies. Secondly, values 1 to 5 were given for 'Never or almost never true of me', 'usually not true of me', 'somewhat true of me', 'usually true of me', and 'always or almost always true of me' respectively so that the minimum score a participant would score is the number of the items of a group multiplied by 1, and the maximum score she/he would score is the number of the items of a group multiplied by 5.

Histograms were produced for the students' scores on each of the six groups of the language learning strategies and for their CGPA to see if the data look like they approximate a normal distribution, and it is shown that the distributions are symmetric and have the shape of the cross-section of a bell where many of the scores are around the mean scores. In relation to this idea, Connolly (2007, p. 43/46) says the following:

*Before we even think about calculating summary statistics for a scale variable it is important to first look carefully at the data for that variable to see how they are distributed....Overall the histogram is a good chart to use when displaying the characteristics of a single scale variable as it is simple to understand and is able to display the shape and distribution of the data very clearly and accessibly.*

Then, Pearson's r correlation coefficient was computed on SPSS version 20 to examine the correlation between the participants' use of the learning strategies and their CGPA. To determine the strength of a correlation, the cut-off points suggested by Cohen (1988), as cited in Greasley (2008), were applied. "As a general guideline, a value ranging from 0.1 to 0.4 would be classed as a weak correlation, and anything above 0.5 would be regarded as a strong correlation.... A value approaching zero indicates the absence of any relationship between two variables, in other words no correlation" (Greasley, 2008, p. 80). Coefficient of determination was also computed to examine the extent to which the participants' use of the learning strategies predicts their CGPA. In relation to this idea, Greasley (2008, p. 82) says, "It is referred to as the coefficient of determination (r<sup>2</sup>), and provides a measure of the degree to which one variable, predicts' the other by simply squaring the correlation value. You can then simply multiply this by 100 to give a percentage value."

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tables show the results of Pearson's r correlation coefficient computed to examine the correlation between the participants' use of the English language learning strategies and their CGPA.

**Table 1:** Correlation of the Participants' UMS\* and their CGPA\*

UMS\* = Use of Memory Strategies; CGPA\* = Cumulative Grade Average Point

	UMS	CGPA
Pearson Correlation	1	.965**
UMS Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
N	61	61
Pearson Correlation	.965**	1
CGPA Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	61	61

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

Table 1 above shows the correlation of the participants' use of the memory strategies and their CGPA. The table depicts that the r-value is .965\*\*; the r-value is closer to 1.000. The p-value is .000, and the

correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This shows that there is a strong positive correlation between the participants' use of the memory strategies and their CGPA. That is to say, as the participants' use of the memory strategies increases, their CGPA also increases and the vice versa. The coefficient of determination computed indicates that the participants' use of the memory strategies predicts their CGPA by 93.1225%.

**Table 2:** Correlation of the Participants' UCS\* and their CGPA

UCS\* = Use of Cognitive Strategies

		UCS	CGPA
UCS	Pearson Correlation	1	.983**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	61	61
CGPA	Pearson Correlation	.983**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	61	61

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

The above table demonstrates the correlation of the participants' use of the cognitive strategies and their CGPA. It is indicated that the r-value is .856\*\*, which is closer to 1.000; the p-value is .000, and thus the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This confirms that there is a strong positive correlation between the participants' use of the cognitive strategies and their CGPA. That is, as the participants' use of the cognitive strategies increases, their CGPA increases too and the vice versa. The coefficient of determination carried out shows that the participants' use of the strategies predicts their CGPA by 96.6289%.

**Table 3:** Correlation of the Participants' UCMS\* and their CGPA

UCMS\* = Use of Compensation Strategies

		UCMS	CGPA
UCMS	Pearson Correlation	1	.973**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	61	61
CGPA	Pearson Correlation	.973**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	61	61

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

Table 3 above shows the correlation of the participants' use of the compensation strategies and their CGPA. It is indicated that the r-value is .937\*\*, the r-value is closer to 1.000, and the p-value is .000. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This reveals that there is a strong positive correlation between the participants' use of the compensation strategies and their CGPA. To be precise, as the participants' use of the strategies increases, their CGPA also increases and the vice versa. The coefficient of determination carried out shows that the participants' use of the strategies predicts their CGPA by 94.6729%.

**Table 4:** Correlation of the Participants' UMCS\* and their CGPA

UMCS\* = Use of Metacognitive Strategies

		UMCS	CGPA
UMCS	Pearson Correlation	1	.949**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	61	61
CGPA	Pearson Correlation	.949**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	61	61

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

Table 4 depicts the correlation of the participants' use of the metacognitive strategies and their CGPA. As indicated in the table, the r-value is .922\*\*. The r-value is closer to 1.000; the p-value is .000. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This tells us that there is a strong positive correlation

between the participants' use of the metacognitive strategies and their CGPA. To be precise, as the participants' use of the strategies increases, their CGPA also increases and the vice versa. The coefficient of determination computed confirms that the participants' use of the strategies predicts their CGPA by 90.0601%.

**Table 5:** Correlation of the Participants' UAS\* and their CGPA

UAS\* = Use of Affective Strategies

		UAS	CGPA
UAS	Pearson Correlation	1	.972**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	61	61
CGPA	Pearson Correlation	.972**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	61	61

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

Table 5 reveals the correlation of the students' use of the affective strategies and their CGPA. As shown in the table, the r-value is .925\*\*. It is closer to 1.000, and the p-value is .000. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This tells us that there is a strong positive correlation between the students' use of the strategies and their CGPA; as the participants' use of the strategies increases, their CGPA also increases and the vice versa. The coefficient of determination conducted confirms that the students' use of the strategies predicts their CGPA by 94.4784%.

**Table 6:** Correlation of the Participants' USS\* and their CGPA

USS\* = Use of Social Strategies

		USS	CGPA
USS	Pearson Correlation	1	.961**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	61	61
CGPA	Pearson Correlation	.961**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	61	61

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

Table 6 above depicts the correlation of the students' use of the social strategies and their CGPA. The table demonstrates that the r-value is .936\*\*; the r-value is closer to 1.000, and the p-value is .000. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This reveals that there is a strong positive correlation between the students' use of the social strategies and their CGPA. That is to say, as the students' use of the strategies increases, their CGPA also increases and the vice versa. The coefficient of determination carried out shows that the students' use of the strategies predicts their CGPA by 92.3521%.

#### IV. SUMMARY OF MAJOR RESULTS

Pearson's r correlation coefficient computed to examine the correlation of the participants' use of each of the six groups of the English language learning strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social) and their CGPA revealed that there is a strong positive correlation (r-values > .949, p-value = .000). As the participants' use of each of the learning strategies increases, their CGPA also increases and the vice versa. The coefficient of determination revealed that the participants' use of the strategies predicts their CGPA by > 90.0601%. These results are consistent with the findings of studies by some scholars and the research literature in the area such as Fewell, 2010; Song, 2005; Griffiths, 2003; Wharton, 2000; Oxford, 1990; Green & Oxford, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Chamot & Kupper, 1989; O'Malley, et al., 1985.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, this study concludes that there is a strong positive correlation between English language majoring students' use of English language learning strategies and their academic achievement. That is to say, as the students' use of English language learning strategies increases, their academic achievement increases too and when their use of the strategies decreases their academic achievement decreases as well. These

findings can be generalized to the English language majoring students of other universities across the nation. According to the existing placement policy, the student population does not vary from one university to another in terms of demography, English language ability, gender, age, learning styles, affective factors, and family, educational, academic, and social background.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Due attention should be given by concerned stakeholders to encourage English language majoring students regularly use different types of English language learning strategies; as a result, their academic achievement would be improved.
- English language majoring students need to receive training on language learning strategies which involves lessons where students are explicitly taught language learning strategies and explanations are given as to when, how and why the strategies can be used. As a result, they would be able to maximize their use of the strategies and improve their academic achievement.

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