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# ESL Learners' Learning Motivations and Strategies

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*Abstract: The purposes of this study were to understand ESL (English as a Second Language) students' learning motivations and learning strategies in the West North Central division of the United States. Respondents included 133 students enrolled in intensive English classes in six institutions in Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and North Dakota. This study concluded that the ESL students in the West North Central Division of the United States tend to be more instrumentally motivated than integratively motivated when learning English. In addition, African students are more instrumentally motivated than are the American, Asian, European, and Middle Eastern students. The ESL students in West North Central states prefer using metacognitive, social, compensation, and cognitive strategies more frequently than using memory and affective strategies. Overall, female students use strategies more frequently than male students when learning English. European students prefer memory strategies and African students prefer cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies. European and Asian students prefer compensation strategies and Middle Eastern students prefer social strategies. The researcher suggests that since ESL students' learning motivations and strategies are different, ESL instructors should understand more about students' motivations and strategies in order to vary their teaching style to achieve better results in language learning.*

Keywords: ESL, Learning Motivation, Learning Strategies

## Introduction

**T**HREE KINDS OF English speakers are in the world: "those who speak as a first language, those for who it is a second or additional language and those who learn it as a foreign language" (Graddol, 1997, p. 10). A recent estimate suggests that approximately 375 million people (4.84% of people in the world) speak English as their first language (Graddol, 1997; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Even though about 7,000 different languages exist in the world (Gordon, 2006), many people choose English to communicate with each other. It is common to see a Chinese medical doctor publishing findings in English-language journals or a Japanese business person conducting business in Mexico in English (Jandt, 2001).

What distinguishes English today is not the number of native speakers, but the growing population of non-native English speakers who learn English as a second or foreign language. Graddol predicted that the number of non-native English speakers would surpass the number of native English speakers in the near future (1999, p. 57); while over 375 million people speak English as their first language, another billion or so are using English as a second language or are learning to do so (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997).

According to the data provided from the Institute of International Education (IIE), each year more than 560,000 international students study in the United States: 586,323 in 2002/03, 572,509 in 2003/04,

565,039 in 2004/05 (2004), and 564,766 in 2005/06 (2006b). During the 2003-04 academic year, 43,003 students enrolled in intensive English language learning; during the 2004-05 academic year, the number of students grew to 44,565 (IIE, 2005); and in the following year, the number declined to 43,580 (IIE, 2006a). Regarding the English speaking population, many scholars and researchers pay close attention to why people want to learn English (Motivations) (Dornyei, 1994; Ely, 1986; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Masgoret, Bernaus, & Gardner, 2001; Root, 1999) and how people learn it (Strategies) (Brown, Robson, & Rosenkjar, 2001; Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1987; Wenden, 1991).

Learners would use different ways to approach personal goals through different learning strategy preferences that help them learn more effectively (Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Reid, 1995, 1998). Moreover, when second/foreign language (L2) learners face difficulties during learning English, learners often develop and utilize a wide range of learning strategies to deal with a language that is different than the learners' native languages (Root, 1999). Many researchers found that good learners often apply various strategies to help them succeed in second language learning (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Oxford, 1990; Reid, 1987); additionally, studies show that learning motivation influences learners in their second/foreign language (L2) learning, such as L2 learners' learning strategies, interactions with native



speakers, inputs of receiving in the target language being learned, and performances on tests.

On the other hand, learners' personal cultural and gender backgrounds influence their motivations and strategies in language learning. Learners may have similar learning strategies if they share similar cultural backgrounds. Oxford (1996b) stated that "cultural background affects strategy choice" (p. xi). Some research showed while many Hispanic ESL/EFL learners, for example, chose compensatory strategies and social strategies, many Japanese learners chose cognitive strategies and memory strategies, and they tended to work alone (Bedell & Oxford, 1996; Oxford, 1996a). In addition, some studies showed evidence that male and female learners are systematically different in their disposition toward language studies (Clark & Trafford, 1995; Ludwig, 1983). Schmidt, Boraie, and Kassabgy (1996) found that male students' learning motivations were more integratively oriented and female students' learning motivations were more instrumentally oriented. Oxford (1993) stated that female learners use language learning strategies, such as metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies, more frequently than male learners. Although most studies agree females may be expected to have something of an edge in language learning, "attention to variables such as interests, culturally determined gender roles, sex-related personality differences, and learning circumstances may suggest ways to enhance the language learning success of both males and females" (Ehrman, 1996, p. 168).

## Purposes

To understand L2 learners' learning motivations and learning strategies in the early 21st century, a study was conducted with students in intensive English institutions in the United States. The purpose of this study was to determine and compare the learning motivations and preferred learning strategies of ESL learners in the West North Central Division of the United States. The states included Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and North Dakota. This study is significant to ESL/EFL educators who want to understand the factors that contribute to effective English instruction. The results provide educators with useful information about learning motivations and preferred learning strategies, specifically in the West North Central Division of the United States. Furthermore, this research examines the differences in learning strategies based on students' gender and geographic background. With the results of this study, the researcher hopes to provide and shape the learning environment to reduce conflict between teachers' teaching and students' learning strategies in the classroom, thus helping educators adjust their teaching strategies and curricula to students' learning

preferences. Moreover, this study can help ESL students have a better understanding of their goals of learning a second language and help them recognize and apply different learning strategies in their English language learning.

## Reviews

A series of review and research of related literature provided information on individual differences—such as age, anxiety, aptitude, culture, gender, language learning strategies, language learning styles, motivations, and self-esteem—in second language learning, learning motivation theories, learning strategy theories, and effective language learners. First, the review provided a view of individual differences, such as age, aptitude, anxiety, culture, gender, language learning strategies, language learning styles, motivations, and self-esteem, among students when learning English. Second, the review gave a theoretical background of language learning motivations and learning strategies. While Gardner's (1985) learning motivation theory gave a comprehensive view of students' intrinsic and extrinsic learning motivations, Oxford's learning strategy theory provided a picture of students' "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) in language learning. Third, the review gave examples how other researchers conduct studies in learning motivations. Fourth, the review provided examples of how other researchers investigated in language learning strategies. Last, the review explored the ideas of being an effective language learner. As Rubin (1975) suggested, a good learner has to (1) be a willing and accurate guesser; (2) have a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from a communication; (3) be often not inhibited; (4) be prepared to attend to form; (5) practice often; (6) monitor his/her own and the speech of others; and (7) attend to meaning (Rubin, 1975).

## Methodology and Procedures

The target population for this research consisted of all English as a second language (ESL) students in intermediate and advanced levels at six intensive English institutions in the West North Central States of Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and North Dakota. Each institution selected for the study had one of the most intensive English learner population in the state and had a wide variety of students from different regions, such as Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Middle East. The total students enrolled in intensive English institutions in these four states were approximately 340 students in 2005/06 school year. Due to concerns about participants' reading ability, the researcher selected ESL students whose English skills were intermediate level and advanced level at their

intensive English institutions. This produced a study population of approximately 250 students. Table 1

presents the A summary of student demographic data.

Table 1: *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Characteristics	<i>f</i>	Percent	Characteristics	<i>f</i>	Percent
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Geographic Background</b>		
Female	58	47.5	African	13	10.7
Male	64	52.5	American	16	13.1
<b>Age</b>			Asian	58	47.5
18 or less	2	1.6	European	10	8.2
18-23	53	43.4	Middle Eastern	25	20.5
24-29	52	42.6	<b>Years of ESL</b>		
30-35	5	4.1	First Year	110	90.2
36-41	2	1.6	Second Year	4	3.3
42-49	8	6.6	Other	8	6.6
			<b>Class Level</b>		
			Advanced	67	54.9
			Intermediate	55	45.1

Note.  $N=122$ .  $f$ =Frequency.

## Instrument

The instrument, entitled *English as Second Language Learning Motivation and Learning Strategy Inventory*, used in this study was a composite of portions of two well established surveys: Gardner's (1985) the *Attitude/Motivation Test Battery* (AMTB) and Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL, EFL/ESL 7.0 version). With seven demographic questions, a total of 72 items comprised the instrument. The instrument was designed to gather data in two major areas: (1) L2 learners' self-motivation in language learning and (2) preferred learning strategy use.

Participants had approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete the survey online, and the responses were submitted directly to the researcher. The data obtained from the returned surveys were analyzed and responses to the research questions were made using descriptive and inferential statistics, including item means, standard deviations,  $t$  tests, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs), and multiple com-

parison tests. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to interpret the English as second language (ESL) students' learning motivations and preferred English learning strategies.

## Findings and Conclusions

The findings and conclusions are listed below:

1. The mean of the 122 participants' instrumental motivation was 4.28 and the integrative motivation was 3.69; approximately 98.4% ( $n=120$ ) of students were moderately to highly motivated instrumentally and approximately 93.4% ( $n=113$ ) of students were moderately to highly motivated integratively. Both male and female students study English for the benefits they accrue from acquiring English as a second language more than for their favorable attitude toward or personal interests in English. A summary of descriptive statistic for language learning motivation is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *Summary of Descriptive Statistic for Language Learning Motivation*

Motivations	Mean	Standard Deviation
Integrative Motivation	3.69	.618
Instrumental Motivation	4.28	.514

Note.  $N=122$ ,  $M$ =Mean,  $SD$ =Standard Deviation.

1. Between male and female students, significant differences were found in instrumental motivation,  $F(4,117)=4.064$ ,  $p=.004$ . African students ( $M=4.73$ ) are more motivated by the benefits gained from acquiring English language (instru-

mentally motivated) than are the American ( $M=4.59$ ); Asian ( $M=4.19$ ),  $p=0.27$ ; European ( $M=4.02$ ),  $p=.041$ ; and Middle Eastern students ( $M=4.17$ ),  $p=.048$ . Table 3 presents a summary of variation in learning motivation by students' gender, and Table 4 shows a summary of vari-

ation in language learning motivation by participants' geographic backgrounds.

Table 3: Summary of Variation in Learning Motivation by Gender

Motivations	Male (N=64)		Female (N=58)		t	p
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	SD		
Integrative Motivation	3.68	.626	3.71	.358	-.234	.816
Instrumental Motivation	4.25	.724	4.32	.478	-.687	.493

Note. N=122, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation. t= t Statistic. p=probability.  $p < .05$ .

Table 4: Summary of Variation in Language Learning Motivation by Geographic Background

Geographic	N	Integrative		Instrumental	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
African	13	3.85	.546	4.73	.401
The American	16	3.65	.277	4.59	.407
Asian	58	3.68	.590	4.19	.671
European	10	3.51	.335	4.03	.478
Middle Eastern	25	3.69	.514	4.17	.594
ANOVA		<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
		.693	.598	4.064	.004*

\* $p < .05$

1. The students' preferred strategies were compensation strategies ( $M=3.67$ ), metacognitive strategies ( $M=3.83$ ), social strategies ( $M=3.77$ ),

and cognitive strategies ( $M=3.62$ ). The least preferred strategies were memory strategies ( $M=3.39$ ) and affective strategies ( $M=3.34$ ). A summary of descriptive statistic for language learning strategies is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of Descriptive Statistic for Language Learning Strategy

Strategies	Mean	Standard Deviation
Metacognitive	3.85	.444
Social	3.77	.537
Compensation	3.67	.535
Cognitive	3.62	.464
Memory	3.39	.497
Affective	3.34	.662
Overall Strategy Use	3.61	.400

1. Female students ( $M=3.71$ ) utilized learning strategies significantly more frequently than male students ( $M=3.52$ ),  $t(120) = -2.808, p = .006$ . Table 6 presents the summary of variation in language learning strategy by students' gender. Moreover, African and Middle Eastern students

prefer indirect learning strategies: metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. European, Asian, and the American students prefer direct strategies: memory, cognitive, and compensatory strategies. Table 7 presents a summary of variation in language learning strategy by geographic background.

Table 6: Summary of Variation in Language Learning Strategy by Gender

Strategies	Male (N=64)		Female (N=58)		t	p
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation		
Memory	3.31	.533	3.48	.443	-1.827	.070
Cognitive	3.54	.487	3.72	.422	-2.170	.032*
Compensatory	3.51	.557	3.84	.454	-3.588	.000*
Metacognitive	3.77	.488	3.95	.371	-2.281	.024*
Affective	3.25	.551	3.46	.757	-1.696	.093
Social	3.71	.483	3.84	.586	-1.362	.176
Overall Strategy Use	3.52	.380	3.71	.400	-2.808	.006*

\*p<.05

Table 7  
Summary of Variation in Learning Strategy by Geographic Background

	African (N=13)		American (N=16)		Asian (N=58)		European (N=10)		Middle Eastern (N=25)		F	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Memory	3.62	.663	3.39	.441	3.29	.534	3.63	.154	3.43	.373	1.981	.102
Cognitive	3.83	.591	3.31	.298	3.59	.472	3.58	.239	3.82	.418	4.052	.004*
Compensatory	3.69	.646	3.35	.361	3.78	.585	3.78	.394	3.56	.408	2.492	.047*
Metacognitive	4.18	.377	3.88	.262	3.85	.486	3.80	.355	3.69	.427	2.904	.025*
Affective	3.77	.894	3.44	.374	3.17	.622	3.44	.602	3.46	.689	2.821	.028*
Social	3.75	.906	3.76	.167	3.79	.532	3.64	.280	3.81	.558	.189	.944
Overall Strategy Use	3.81	.627	3.52	.130	3.58	.424	3.64	.171	3.63	.366	1.123	.349

\*p<.05

## Discussion

The findings related to learning motivation showed that the majority of the participants were more instrumentally motivated than integratively motivated when learning English. According to the scores (Table 4), female students were slightly more integratively and instrumentally motivated than male students. However, the findings showed significant differences in instrumental motivation based on participants' geographic background.

Based on Gardner's theories, Schmidt, Boraie, and Kassabgy (1996) stated "cultural beliefs influence the development of the integrative motive and the degree to which integrativeness and achievement are related" (p. 13). The findings showed that African students tended to be the most instrumentally motivated, and European students tend to be the least instrumental motivated. However, little research was focused on the relationship between learning motivation and students' geographic background, the researcher could not conclude which cultural beliefs influence students' motivation in English learning.

The finding related to learning strategies showed that the majority of the participants preferred using metacognitive, social, compensation, cognitive, and memory strategies. In addition, female students presented use strategies more frequently than male students, which support Oxford's finding (1993). However, Oxford (1993) found that female students use metacognitive, affective, and social strategies more frequently than male students. In the present study, the findings showed that female students tended to use metacognitive, compensatory, and cognitive strategies more frequently than male students. The finding is supported by Oxford and Dreyer's (1996) finding that female students made greater use of metacognitive strategies than did male students.

As mentioned above, learners' cultural backgrounds influence their choice of strategies in language learning. The findings of the present study showed that African students tended to use more metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and social strategies. The American students tended to use more metacognitive, social, and affective strategies. European students tended to use metacognitive, compensatory, social, and memory strategies more frequently. Middle Eastern students tended to use cognitive, social, metacognitive, and compensatory strategies more frequently. Asian students tended to use metacognitive, social, compensatory, and cognitive strategies more frequently. However, affective and memory strategies were unpopular among Asian students. These findings are supported by Bedell and

Oxford (1996). They discovered that Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese) students used social, metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies more frequently but used social strategies less frequently.

## Recommendations

Since ESL students' learning motivations are different, ESL instructors should understand more about students' motivation in order to achieve better results in language learning. Moreover, since ESL students use diverse learning strategies to learn English, ESL instructors should be aware of the different choices of the use of learning strategies among students' gender and cultural or geographic background and provide different approaches to enhance students' learning in English language. In addition, ESL institutions and faculty members should revise curricula to fit the needs of both male and female students, and students with different geographic backgrounds and should be aware of and understand learners' learning strategies in order to introduce different strategies to students and encourage them to expand the use of different learning strategies when learning English.

The participants in this study were limited to ESL students in the West North Central Division of the United States. Further studies should be conducted with ESL students in other geographic areas of the United States and internationally. Furthermore, future research needs to explore other variables—including age, length of study, anxiety, aptitude, learning style, and self-esteem—that may influence the use of language learning strategies and determine the differences in the use of language learning strategies based on learners' age in order to understand the relationship of younger and older learners' learning strategies and learning proficiencies. At last, little research was focused on which cultural elements influence ESL students' motivations and strategies in language learning; therefore, qualitative research that investigates the phenomenon of language learning is encouraged for further studies. Moreover, little research was focused on learners' learning motivation, strategies, and styles based on learners' social and economic status. Qualitative and quantitative research that investigates the phenomenon of learning is encouraged for further studies.

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Teaching English as a second language to speakers of other languages is my life-long dream. I currently teach English at the Transworld Institute of Technology in Douliou, Taiwan. My most recent research includes ESL learners' learning motivations and strategies and How cultural differences affect language learners learning languages.

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