

# LEARNER PREFERENCES IN THE USE OF STRATEGIES IN LEARNING GRAMMAR (DİL BİLGİSİ ÖĞRENİMİNDE STRATEJİ KULLANIMINDA ÖĞRENCİ TERCİHLERİ)

Arif SARIÇOBAN \*

**Abstract :** This paper aims at identifying the strategies employed by Foreign Language learners in Turkey in learning English grammar. To do this a Grammar Learning Strategy Questionnaire was administered to subjects at a preparatory school at the university level. It can be stated that this study has proven very successful in the identification of many students' beliefs about grammar learning in a foreign language (FL) class. Some of the results reported here may surprise FL teachers, but it is clear that most of them will confirm their experiences and ideas in teaching grammar. Students expressed that they subconsciously used the cognitive strategies. However, it is clear that they also need to use the socio-affective strategies to learn grammar efficiently. That is why, teachers need to build some strategic techniques so that the students can have a better learning environment. This study will contribute to FL teachers by bringing some insights about learner strategies in Grammar and it is believed that under the light of the findings FL teachers will improve and adopt new tactics for the teaching of grammar.

**Key Words:** Grammar Strategies, Foreign Language Learning, Teaching, Cognitive, Meta-Cognitive, Socio-Affective Strategies.

## I. Introduction

*“What can I do to help my students become proficient in language learning?”* Many language teachers have been asking this question and have tried to find answers through a variety of techniques. They have applied one method or another. They sometimes either tried eclectic combinations of some methods, or even disregarded all methods completely.

Learning usually involves two people- a teacher and a student. Thus, the teacher cannot do the job of learning alone. Of course, it is true that many language theorists such as Brown (1984) and Nunan, (1999) maintain the importance of communicative competence in language learning. However, it should also be kept in mind that communicative competence is sufficient for students to learn or acquire the language effectively. To be communicatively competent students need to develop some learning strategies. That is, because teachers are expected to find an answer to why some students learn easily while others see learning a language as a “nightmare.”

Although it is widely maintained that grammar is the basis of language and that mastery of grammar is a prerequisite for effective language learning, this is not necessarily true. However, disregarding grammar teaching and trying

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\* Assit.Prof.Dr., Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, Turkey.

to teach merely the communicative competence cannot be the best way to teach. In other words, separating grammar from the language is totally a wrong attitude since language is holistic, not linear. For example, if we separate grammar from vocabulary or speaking, we distort the language. Then, grammar must be taught appropriately. The question is how to be consistent with the learner strategies in teaching grammar as indicated below by Chastain, 1988.

*“... All students have learning strategies; some are successful and some are not. ... Teachers have two equally important obligations in class. One is to teach students how to learn, that is, learning strategies that will enhance learning in the subject for someone with their particular learning style. In general, teachers are much more attentive to the product of learning than process of learning. ...”*

This study addresses these issues, describing a survey research investigating the ways in which some language learners make conscious efforts to learn English grammar more efficiently. After describing the learning strategies of these language learners, some suggestions will be made for the purpose of providing teachers with the way these examples of learning strategies can be used in teaching grammar.

## **II. Background To The Study**

Investigation of students' learning strategies is a relatively new endeavor in the field of language learning. In addition, there is a scarcity of a specific investigation in grammar learning strategies in language learning. On the other hand, studies of language learners have classified learning strategies in various ways.

The study of learning strategies outside the field of native language learning has a much larger body of literature and a wider history. Therefore, this review of the literature will use some investigations on the use of learner strategies.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified general learning strategies as:

1. the ones directly affecting learning” such as monitoring, memorization, deductive reasoning, etc.

2. a process that contributes indirectly to learning, such as using circumlocutions, or formulaic interaction, listening to TV and etc.

In O'Malley and Chamot's view, there is a detailed list of techniques used by language learners. In these techniques, “grammar” is a class like vocabulary to read or write. Under the heading of grammar, the mentioned techniques are as follows:

- a. following rules given in texts;
- b. inferring grammar rules from texts,

- c. comparing L1 and L2 ; and
- d. memorising structures and using them often. (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990 : 6)

Our main concern was to see if language learners in Turkey employed different strategies in learning grammar. Moreover, the researcher also tried to see if language learners employed the strategy of making use of learners' own native language more than the target one in grasping grammar points. This was believed to give an idea of the issue of effectiveness of positive or negative transfer from the native language on the target language.

### **III. Description of The Study**

#### ***A. Objectives***

The primary purposes of this study are:

- (1) to identify the range of grammar learning strategies used by students learning Turkish as a foreign language
- (2) to determine if the strategies can be defined and organized,
- (3) to determine whether teaching strategies are consistent with learning strategies,
- (4) to make comparisons between the use of strategy types.

A pre-defined list of strategies used by other researchers is not preferred because the researcher is interested in a specific group of students. The results of this study can hardly be generalized to all language students owing to a small representative group. In addition, since the basic aim of the students participating in learning English is to learn English language for academic purposes rather than being communicative, they give priority to grammar and learning grammar seems to be more important for them. That's why this condition makes the researcher simplify his research method and data collection procedures to get some certain valid results.

#### ***B. Procedures***

The study was designed to provide retrospective data from prep-school EFL students on the strategies used by them in classroom environment. Classrooms at the pre-intermediate level of English Proficiency at Çankaya University were the subject group of this research. The grammar learning strategies are classified in three categories as cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective strategies, as Chastain (1988:166) did, in this study.

#### ***C. Participants***

The participants were 100 prep-school students at the university level. They had different backgrounds in English and most of them were considered to have studied English in their secondary education. As is mentioned earlier, their main aim was to get an "entry-pass" into their departments – that is EAP

(English for Academic Purposes). As a result, they consciously gave more importance to learning grammar.

#### ***D. Data Collection***

The data on strategies used by the students were collected through a questionnaire (see Appendix) in which there are 38 statements. The questionnaire was conducted in Turkish for clarity. It was designed and developed by the professionals in the field. Ten items of the questionnaire are about meta-cognitive strategies, nineteen were about cognitive strategies and the rest were about socio-affective strategies. The test was first piloted to a group of students of the same nature and the reliability level was found .72.

#### ***E. Data Analysis***

The data obtained as a result of the administration of the questionnaire were analyzed through percentage study. Moreover, the researcher made comparisons and contrasted the type of strategy use according to the learners' preferences.

#### ***F. Definitions and Classifications***

Since there is no need to define the techniques to be used in observation and interview, it would be worthwhile explaining the kinds of techniques to be applied in implementing the questionnaire.

The basic classification scheme made by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), which consists of meta-cognitive, cognitive and social-affective strategies were used in the study. First eleven questions are designed to find answers to what kind of meta-cognitive strategies they use and the following nineteen questions ask the use of cognitive strategies, and the remaining nine questions ask to find what kind of social-affective strategies are used by the students while learning grammar in class.

### **IV. Data Analysis**

Class observations and interviews will yield information concerning grammar learning strategies of the students because the number of the students were limited to approximately 100 students. Moreover, it seems difficult to observe what kind of mental activities the students will be applying.

The students seem to avoid using structures not being equal in their native language, such as The Present Perfect Tense. Since there is no objection and most of them agree with this idea, the researcher thinks that they certainly compare the grammar they are learning with their mother tongue grammar subconsciously. Consequently, many of the students the researcher interviewed orally during the class hour are considered not conscious about the strategies they use in class to learn grammar. However, he strongly believes that they can become aware of the strategies when being told with the help of clear examples.

### ***A. Examples of Grammar Learning Strategies Described by Students***

Excerpts from the student interviews can reveal students' use of strategies in their efforts to learn English grammar. The following examples, some of which the researcher translated from Turkish, are typical comments made during the interviews.

1. For meta-cognitive strategies, "I cannot understand why there are so many tenses in English." "If there is speaking, writing or reading activity, I prefer sleeping." "I can learn English grammar easily if you state it with formulas."

2. For cognitive strategies, "I want you to speak Turkish while teaching grammar." "I cannot memorize, so I want to learn it." "While teaching English grammar, can you also give us the Turkish equivalent, too?" "I think I am not good at languages, but mathematics." "I hate The Present Perfect Tense."

3. For socio-affective strategies, "I like playing grammar games." "Because Mehmet Akif gets good grades, I try to take him as a model in class." "I try to take notes in class."

### ***B. Results of Questionnaires***

We categorized 18 main learning strategies into 3 main groups. Among one hundred students, questions 2, 5, 6, 8, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 32, 33, and 37 were accepted by the participants, whereas questions 3, 4, 9, 10, 22, 24, 25, 26, 30, 31, 35, were the least accepted statements.

First of all, these results indicate that students are good at using their cognitive strategies though not being good at using meta-cognitive and socio-cognitive strategies as much as in cognitive strategies.

Since questions 1, 4 and 10 ask for self-monitoring strategies of the students in meta-cognitive strategies, it is possible to state that the students are not very effective in applying these strategies. For example, most of them –that is, % 71- do not attempt to correct their friends' grammatical mistakes. Secondly, answers for 2, 6 and 8 indicate that their organizational planning in learning grammar has an important role in their strategies. To illustrate, more than 90 of a hundred students want their teacher to present every grammatical structure in detail allowing them to analyze the new structures. Besides, questions 3 and 9 are the least applied strategies due to the fact that they do not have much self-evaluation. However, they believe that grammar is not enough to learn English. While question 7 asks for selective attention and it has received little acceptance, question 5, which tries to find their advance organization, indicates that they use advance organization skills a lot. For example, they are aware of the fact that grammar is important for them in learning English.

In the second general class - that is, cognitive strategies - questions 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 28 and 29 indicate that they are the mostly applied strategies, whereas questions 22, 24, 25 and 26 show that they don't use these strategies very often. For example, it became clear that they definitely want to learn one thing at a time. Consequently, they obviously use their deduction, induction, grouping auditory representation and elaboration strategies a lot though not being good at note taking while learning grammar.

Finally, the questions for their socio-affective strategies show that they want to do exercises about the new structures, but they have difficulties in eliciting from these activities. Furthermore, they want to internalize the new structures by playing with grammar since they do not like working on the new structures on their own. One interesting result here is that they, unlike the general idea that teachers shouldn't correct the students' grammatical mistakes in class, want to be corrected by their teachers for their grammatical mistakes in class. Finally, questions 36, 37 and 38 indicate that they have difficulties in reducing their anxiety in participating in the classroom atmosphere.

Table 1. Strategy Use

Questions and Strategies	YES	NO	NA
1. (SM)	51	49	-
2. (OP)	82	18	-
3. (SE)	13	87	-
4. (SM)	32	68	-
5. (AO)	97	3	-
6. (OP)	96	4	-
7. (SA)	30	70	-
8. (OP)	93	7	-
9. (SE)	10	90	-
10. (SM)	29	71	-
11. (TRANS)	46	54	-
12. (AR)	63	37	-
13. (IMA)	64	36	-
14. (SUM / NT)	72	28	-
15. (IMA/RES)	85	15	-
16. (IMA)	97	3	-
17. (D-I / AR)	92	8	-
18. (GROUP)	99	1	-
19. (ELAB)	90	10	-
20. (D – I)	98	2	-
21. (INF)	72	28	-
22. (NT)	35	65	-
23. (TRANS)	77	23	-
24. (TRANS)	6	26	68
25. (TRANS/INF)	15	81	4
26. (TRANS)	33	67	-
27. (GROUP)	65	35	-
28. (SUM / D-I)	87	13	-
29. (ELAB)	85	15	-
30. (QFC)	36	64	-
31. (COOP)	36	64	-
32. (COOP)	73	27	-
33. (QFC)	93	7	-
34. (QFC)	53	47	-
35. (ST)	12	88	-
36. (ST)	47	53	-
37. (ST)	91	9	-
38. (ST)	60	40	-

Table 2. Strategy Use by groups of learners

Metacognitive Strategies	YES	NO	NA
(SM) 1 – 4 – 10	51-32-29	49-68-1	-
(OP) 2 – 6 – 8	82-96-93	18-4-7	-
(SE) 3 – 9	13-10	87-60	-
(SA) 7	30	70	-
(AO) 5	97	3	-
<b>Cognitive Strategies</b>			
(R) 15	75	25	-
(GROUP) 18 – 27	97	3	-
(NT) 22	35	65	-
(SUM) 14 – 28	75-87	28-13	-
( D-I) 17 – 20 – 28	92-98-87	8-2-13	-
(IMA) 13 – 15 – 16	64-75-97	36-25	-
(AR) 12 – 15 – 17	63-75-92	37-25-8	-
(ELAB) 19 – 29	90-85	10-15	-
(TRANS) 11-23-24-25-26	46-77-6-15-33	54-23-26-81-67	68-4
(INFER) 21- 25	72-15	28-85	-
<b>Social-affective Strategies</b>			
(QFC) 30 – 33 – 34	36-93-53	64-7-7	-
(COOP) 31 – 32	36-73	6427	-
(ST) 35 – 36 – 37 – 38	12- 47-91-60	88-53-9-40	-

Abbreviations: SM: self-monitoring OP: organizational planning SA: self-attention SE: self-evaluation AO: advance organization R: resourcing GROUP: grouping NT: note taking SUM: summarizing D-I: deduction-induction IMA: imagery AR: auditory resourcing ELAB: elaboration TRANS:transfer INFER: inferencing QFC: questioning for certification COOP: cooperation ST:self-talk

## V. Discussion And Conclusion

One of the primary purposes for conducting this study was to determine if a strategy classification scheme based on the distinction between meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies would be useful in defining students' learning strategies in grammar.

Some important implications emerged from the study. Students expressed that they subconsciously used the strategies, most of which are cognitive strategies. However, it is clear that they also need to use the socio-affective strategies to learn grammar efficiently. That is why, teachers need to build some strategic techniques so that the students can have a better learning environment. For instance, the results of this study basically indicate that while teaching grammar, teachers need to;

- a. lower inhibitions,
- b. encourage risk-taking,



- c. build students' self-confidence, and
- d. get students to make their mistakes work for them.

This study has proven very successful in the identification of many students' beliefs about grammar learning in a foreign language class. Some of the results reported here may surprise foreign language teachers, but it is clear that most of them will confirm their experiences and ideas in teaching grammar. It must also be kept in mind that it had not taken some factors such as sex, environment, social background, etc into consideration. As a result, it would be hazardous to make some discrete conclusions from this study, but it can indicate some insights for teaching grammar in foreign language classes. For example, we can have general framework of what kind of learning strategies the students use and how they apply these strategies in classroom environment.

In sum, the notion that learning techniques or strategies might help language teaching areas is actually quite new, but it is clear that a good language learner is doing something special or different in learning grammar or other skills. What must be considered is that some students have an ear for language learning or that some students have an inherent ability for language learning, and when they combine this inherent ability with their effective learning strategies, they can provide themselves with an effective learning atmosphere.

**Özet :** Bu çalışma Türk uyruklu yabancı dil öğrencileri tarafından dilbilgisi öğreniminde kullanılan taktikleri irdelemektedir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, üniversite hazırlık sınıfı düzeyinde olan öğrencilere Dilbilgisi Öğrenimi Taktik Anketi uygulanmıştır. Yabancı dil sınıfındaki bir çok öğrencinin dilbilgisi öğrenimi ile ilgili görüşlerini tanımlamada bu çalışmanın başarılı olduğu söylenebilir. Bu çalışmada elde edilen sonuçların bir kısmı dil öğretmenlerini şaşırtabilir. Ancak, çoğunun dilbilgisi öğretimindeki tecrübelerini ve görüşlerini doğruladığı açıkça anlaşılmaktadır. Öğrenciler, çoğunluğu bilişsel olan taktikleri bilinçsiz bir şekilde kullandıklarını ifade ettiler. Bununla birlikte, dilbilgisini etkin bir şekilde öğrenmek için sosyoduyuşsal taktiklerini de kullanmaya ihtiyaçları olduğu açıktır. Bu yüzden, öğretmenlerin, öğrencilerin daha iyi öğrenme ortamına sahip olmaları için, bazı taktiksel teknikler geliştirmeye ihtiyaçları vardır. Bu çalışma, dilbilgisi öğrenimindeki öğrenci taktikleri ile ilgili bazı görüşlerin ortaya konulmasına katkıda bulunacak ve çalışmanın bulguları sayesinde, dil öğretmenlerinin dilbilgisi öğretiminde yeni taktikleri benimseyip, geliştireceklerine inanılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dilbilgisi Taktikleri, Yabancı Dil Öğrenimi, Öğretim, Bilişsel, Bilişötesi, Sosyoduyuşsal Taktikler

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### Appendix Learner Strategies in Grammar

**Instructions :** Dear students, to gain a better understanding of yourselves and to have a more effective education as foreign language learners you need to evaluate the ways you prefer to learn English grammar. Besides, as teachers of English, we would like to present you a more profitable (productive) language learning programme by being aware of your learning strategies.

Meta-cognitive strategies	YES	NO
1. In class, I only use the structures that I'm sure about.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I try to understand the new structures by analyzing all the details.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. If there is an abundance of structures and materials to master, I get very annoyed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. "When I make a mistake, it annoys me, because that's a symbol of how poor my performance is." (Brown, 1994:105)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. If teacher is going to present a new structure, I definitely try to attend that class hour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I prefer teacher's presentation of new structures from simple to complex.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. For me, learning grammar is more difficult than learning writing, listening, speaking and reading skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I would like my teacher explain me a new structure with all the details, and in a formulaic way.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I believe that if I learn grammar, I will have no problem in English.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I always correct my friends' grammatical mistakes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Cognitive Strategies</b>		
11. My knowledge in Turkish grammar helps me a lot in learning English grammar.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. <i>"I remember more about a subject through listening than reading."</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I follow written directions better than the oral directions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. To remember later, I write things down with my way of understanding or in short notes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. I like listening to teacher with the help of audiovisual materials such as newspapers magazines or posters.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. I can better learn a new structure through formulas, graphs or grids.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Generally, I prefer listening quietly to what my teacher tells and get the general framework of what has been presented.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. If there is an abundance of structures to master, I try to learn them sequentially.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. I can better learn by making associations between what I know and what I'm learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. I prefer certain, established information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. I make inferences about the new structure by breaking it into meaningful chunks and analyzing them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. I prefer memorizing grammatical rules through humorous rhymes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. I can better learn every new structure if I find the Turkish equivalent of them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>(If you don't know another foreign language except English do not answer the following question)</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
24. The fact that I know another foreign language (German, french,etc.) helps me learn English more easily.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. The fact that I don't know another foreign language makes me feel that I cannot learn English easily.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. Usually, I avoid using structures which do not have any equivalent in Turkish, such as <i>Present Perfect Tense</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27. I prefer "classifying words , terminology or concepts according to their attributes." (Chastain, 1988:160)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. While speaking or writing , I always try to use the new structures I've learnt.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29. While reading or listening , the new structures I've learnt help me a lot.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Socio-affective Strategies</b>		
30. After my teacher presents a new structure, I usually take notes with my own expressions and write my own example sentences.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31. In class, I prefer working on my own rather than collaborating with my friends.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
32. I can better comprehend a new structure by playing grammar games.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
33. If I do exercises about the new structures that my teacher has just presented, I can better learn and I never forget them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
34. I try to use the new structures I've learnt by raising my hand in the lesson in the second hour. ....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
35. I don't like being corrected for my grammatical mistakes by my teacher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
36. First, I don't want to talk in class since I'm afraid of making mistakes , but then I overcome this problem myself and try to take part in the activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
37. I would like my teacher tell me whether I use the language correctly or incorrectly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
38. Whereas I'm mainly learning the new structures from my teacher, I also observe my friends who are successful in English to strengthen the structures I've learnt.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>39. This is the end of the questionnaire, but if you believe that you apply some different strategies in learning English Grammar, please write them here:</b>		