

**STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A CASE STUDY OF GRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE ISLAMIA UNIVERSITY OF BAHAWALPUR, PAKISTAN**Dr. Sumaira Qanwal<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Shahid Nawaz<sup>\*2</sup>, Tayyaba Sabir<sup>3</sup>

Original Article

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**Abstract**

*The aims of the present study were to identify the language learning strategies (LLS) being used by graduate ESL learners at the Islamia University Bahawalpur (IUB), and to compare the frequencies of different LLS used by these students. A modified short version of strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) used by Bessai (2018) was distributed among 150 ESL learners at The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. The collected data were then analysed by using SPSS. The results indicated that graduate ESL learners at The Islamia University of Bahawalpur use both direct and indirect strategies. The first category includes cognitive strategies, memory strategies and compensation strategies while the second includes metacognitive strategies, social strategies and affective strategies. However, the results reveal a higher preference for using cognitive and metacognitive strategies as compared to the other strategies by these ESL learners.*

**Keywords:** language learning strategies, SILL, direct and indirect strategies, social strategies, cognitive and metacognitive strategies

**INTRODUCTION**

Second language (L2) learners worldwide, especially at university level, have to encounter a great number of difficulties during their process of learning their L2. The difficulties faced by the students in the current situation of Pandemic (Covid-19) can be divided into 4 distinct categories: cognitive problems, meta-cognitive challenges, preferred learning styles, and technical anxiety. Cognitive challenges comprise the area where learners need cognitive abilities higher than normal to deal with tasks that are more multidimensional and have intricate contents (Smith, 2006). Traditionally, online classes are outfitted with advance dynamic purposes including text download, online presentations and videos. Therefore, learners must know how to drilldown, load, save files and open new windows etc. (Wang & Chen 2007; Tsai, 2009; Wu, Fitzgerald & Witten, 2014). As per Chang's (2013) study, self-monitoring when adapted by online learners resulted in better performance in their academics when judged through an English proficiency test. Thirdly, the challenges faced in online learning are related to computer and technology anxiety. In a research by Aydin (2011), it was formulated that computer related mental disturbances place a bad effect on learners' performances. Whenever a network system or computer goes down, it causes severe mental pressure in students as they feel frustrated because it makes them unable to follow the lessons properly (Ekizoglu & Ozcinar, 2010; Saadé & Kira, 2009). In this scenario, the use of various strategies for enhancing learning and coping with different affective factors becomes even more important.

Previous researches on strategies for language learning suggest that the primary concern is “identification of the things adapted by the good language learners when learning a second or foreign language” (Wenden, 1987). Though, in recent studies this method has been widely criticized as they have taken into account the learners’ variable (Naiman, 1978; Rubin & Thompson, 1982; Skehan, 1989). It is easy to teach and utilize the language learning strategies (LLS) to the students positively, majorly to the students who are not familiar with the technological applications (Rubin & Thompson, 1982). There is a large number of studies regarding the learning of a foreign language i.e. English, by the use of LLS in Pakistan (Al-Otaibi, 2004; Al-Buainain, 2010; and Abu-Radwan, 2011 to mention a few). However, in the present mess of the pandemic, it is worth exploration whether ESL learners’ use of learning strategies has got a variation; or their practices in this regard are the same as before.

### **Background of the Study**

During online learning when students require immediate guidance to a certain problem, it can result in development of frustration in students and thus result in mental pressure (Thurmond, Wambach, Connors & Frey, 2002; Arbaugh, 2002; Petrides, 2002; Heirdsfield, Walker, Tambyah, & Beutel, 2011). Surjono (2015) in his study, revealed that cases where the online courses and skills of the students in use of multimedia and their style and preferences of learning matched, it resulted in their greater success and better academic performance. Moreover, multiple past studies also suggest that students’ ability to adapt and learn novel online learning strategies helped them in achieving better academic success. A few of them include Hattie, Biggs, and Purdie (1996); Shih (2005); Zimmerman, 1998; and Artino, and Jones (2012). In their study, Solak and Cakir (2015) demonstrated that adapting useful strategies in online mode of learning is of high significance as it makes the students have more interest, learn faster and learn more effectively.

### **Rationale of the Study**

When the COVID 19 pandemic first started in Pakistan, there was a huge concern regarding academic activities. However, when government introduced online learning classes, it was a whole different experience for the researcher. It was new and interesting method of learning ESL because it involved advanced means of learning and technology. We were able to stay safe, as well as, kept learning ESL through online classes. This motivated the researcher to identify the types of language learning strategies do graduate ESL learners use to overcome their language learning problems, especially being at university which demands more concentration and accomplishments of multivariate academic tasks pertaining to the second language. The researcher was keen to learn different styles and strategies that are in practice in university education in Pakistan during the Pandemic. Following are the research questions which drove the direction of the present study.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- 1- Which type of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) is being used by graduate ESL learners in online classes at the Islamia University of Bahawalpur?
- 2- What are the comparative frequencies of different LLS (LLS)?

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH**

The research is significant in sense that it has helped in identification of the most prevalent Language Learning Strategies used by graduate ESL learners in the current scenario of COVID-19. It seems that a very few local studies have been conducted on the concerned problem in the present situation of novel Coronavirus before. By comparing different strategies in terms of frequency and

percentages, we have been able to identify the more frequent and effective ones and thus may help students by having made certain relevant recommendations in the light of our results.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although tactics of learning language have been utilized for centuries, they were just recently discovered and labeled by experts. LLS are significant as studies show that educating learners how they can become improved learners by getting help from LLS. LLS allow learners to take on a greater level of accountability while also accelerating their improvement in obtaining L2 (L2) abilities. LLS cover a wide variety of behaviors that can aid in the enhancement of language skills in a variety of methods. They are also crucial because students must continue to learn yet they are not in regular classroom set up (Oxford, 1990). They also assist students in assimilating new material into their mental representation. Oxford and Burry-stock (1995) incorporated the valuable aspect in the description of LLS, stating that they can be utilized for a variety of goals, making learning more enjoyable. Researchers have proposed many definitions for LLS since the late 1970s.

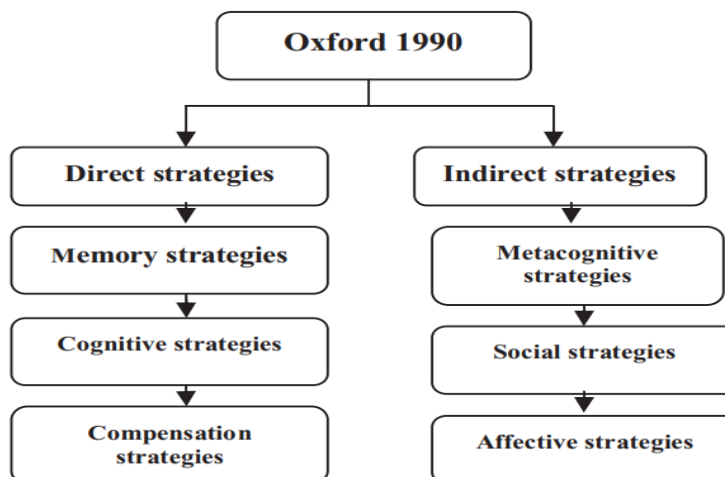
### Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Different scholars have classified Language acquisition strategies into different categories. According to Rubin and Thompson (1982), the strategies that take part in learning language directly or indirectly are of three types. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified such strategies into three different classes: meta-cognitive strategies, social or affective strategies and cognitive strategies (Chang, 2009).

Rubin (1982), O'Malley & Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), and Cohen (1998) all have different schemes of classification for LLSs. Every present categorization system contains an implicit hypothesis regarding the processes of second language learning, and to a lesser degree, about learning L2 generally. The taxonomy of LLS developed by Oxford (1990) was employed in this investigation. Oxford's (1990) framework, according to Jones (1998), produced a system of learning language procedures that are more thorough and complex than other methods. Individual strategies and strategy groups are linked to the 4 abilities of language learning i.e. speaking, reading, listening, and writing) in a systematic way in this taxonomy.

### OXFORD'S TAXONOMY

In 1990, Oxford distinguished between direct & indirect tactics. In direct learning techniques, the target language is directly engaged. Indirect learning techniques assist to facilitate and regulate language acquisition without direct use of the targeted L2 (Oxford, 1990).



**Figure A: Oxford (1990) Classifications of LLSs (Language Learning Strategies)**  
**Direct Strategies**

Direct learning approaches of Oxford's (1990) may be divided into cognitive, memory, and compensatory categories. Memory techniques mirror uncomplicated concepts like organizing things in array, making relationships, and assessing. As a result, in order for a student to acquire or learning a new language, the relations and arrangements must be significant to the learner personally, and the material to be assessed must be pertinent (Littlewood, 1984; Krashen, 1985). Learning a new language necessitates the use of cognitive methods that range from repetition to evaluating phrases to summarizing (Oxford, 1990). Learning a new language involves the application of cognitive techniques such as repetition, analyzing sentences, and summarizing (Dansereau, 1985; Rigney, 1978). The learner's modification or change of the target language is the common thread that runs across all cognitive methods (Chamot, 1987; Wenden, 1987). These are usually considered as the most effective language-learning skills. A cognitive method involves comparing aspects of the new language (grammar vocabulary, sounds, etc.) with elements of the old language to identify parallels and contrasts.

Compensatory methods, as guessing words, are used to compensate the lack of grammar and, particularly, vocabulary knowledge. Along with advanced learners, the native speakers make educated guesses when they haven't heard anything clearly. These language production mechanisms help learners overcome knowledge gaps and continue to speak authentically, allowing them to become more proficient in what they already know (Oxford, 1990).

### **Indirect Strategies**

Oxford (1990) classified indirect learning processes into 3 categories: meta-cognitive, social, and emotional. Indirect language learning solutions help to facilitate and deal with language acquisition exclusive of directly utilizing the marked language. As individuals progress toward communicative competence, meta-cognitive methods assist learners in regulating their cognition and planning, focusing, and evaluating their process of language learning. Learners, for instance, search for or generate chances to carry out the new language in real-life circumstances e.g., preparing oneself for a discussion with university alumni on a particular event. Affective methods, such as laughing at one's own blunders, help learners gain the self-confidence and perseverance they need to participate effectively in language learning (Oxford, 1990).

Regardless of categorization, LLSs facilitate language learners to be in command of their learning, improve their proficiency, (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and significantly, be self-sufficient (Vandergrift, 2002). Oxford's (1990) Inventory for learning a second language (SILL) is employed to gather information about language students worldwide (such as Al-Natour, 2012; Griffiths, 2003; and Leung, 2011).

The instrument has good validity. SILL has been utilized in a number of researches to look at the impact of various factors on strategy usage (such as Park, 1997; Khalil, 2005; Han & Lin, 2000; Nisbet, 2002; and Abu-Radwan, 2011). The findings revealed substantial variations in the choice of approach. According to the data, females are more prone than males to adopt methods. They utilize techniques more frequently than males, according to Green and Oxford (1995). Furthermore, gender disparities are mirrored in the strategies employed by males and females. Tran (1988) observed that men in refugee camps are notorious for their "survival learning," in which they are compelled to learn English in order to survive.

Wharton (2000) discovered no variations in the techniques used by language learners in Singaporeans bilingual population. This might be because multilingual students have a general advantage in language learning capacity and skill, which could have negated any possible gender inequalities in method application).

### **Role of learning strategies in Second Language**

Learning an L2, often known as a foreign language, is one of the most significant aspects of education in almost every school throughout the world. Over the last two decades, there has been a significant movement in language education, with Instead than focusing on instructors and teaching, the focus should be on learners and learning. Extensive research has proven the relevance of LLS in accelerating the language learning process and having a key role in the usage of language. Specific acts, behaviours, procedures, or techniques that students employ deliberately to increase their knowledge, internalisation, and application of a foreign or L2 (LS) are known as learning strategies (Oxford, 1990).

One type of LLS is communication techniques. All techniques used by L2/FL learners to acquire the target language are referred to as LLS. LLS is required reading for all L2 teachers who want to help their students improve their communication skills and language acquisition. LLS are important because studies suggest that teaching pupils how to use LLS can increase their language learning ability.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The present study employs exploratory-cum-descriptive mode of investigation.

### **RESEARCH SITE**

For conducting the present research, a key department which extends expertise in teaching English as a second language, namely, The department of English Linguistics at a university located in southern Panjab of Pakistan, i.e., The Islamia University of Bahawalpur was selected.

### **RESEARCH SAMPLE**

This research engaged 150 ESL learners enrolled in BS (Hons) English Linguistics program at the Islamia University of Bahawalpur. The researchers selected their research participants from all eight semesters of the BS program run at the said department. The rationale behind choosing the sample size of 150 students was that this number is neither too large to make data collection difficult,

nor too small to make the obtained data inconsequential and unrepresentative of the original population.

### RESEARCH TOOL

The data collecting tool utilized in this study was a modified version of SILL, initially developed by Oxford (1990) to evaluate the learning strategies employed in traditional ESL learning. This questionnaire originally contained 50 questions, which were shortened to 30 items whose responses were obtained on 5-point likert scale regarding frequency of language use, i.e. never, rarely, sometimes, often and always.

### DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained through questionnaire were submitted to SPSS (version 20). Frequency distribution statistics were run on the submitted data. The results are given below:

### MEMORY STRATEGIES

The majority of the participants (51.3%) 'sometimes' 'use new English words to remember them.' The majority (53.1%) also 'sometimes' 'connects sound of the new English word with its image.' However, the majority (42%) 'often' 'tries to create a mental picture of the situation in which a new word is used.' The majority of the students 'sometimes' use rhymes' and 'act out new English words to remember them easily' (38% and 49.3% respectively). The figures (1-5) below show the frequencies of responses against item 1-5.

1. "I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember."

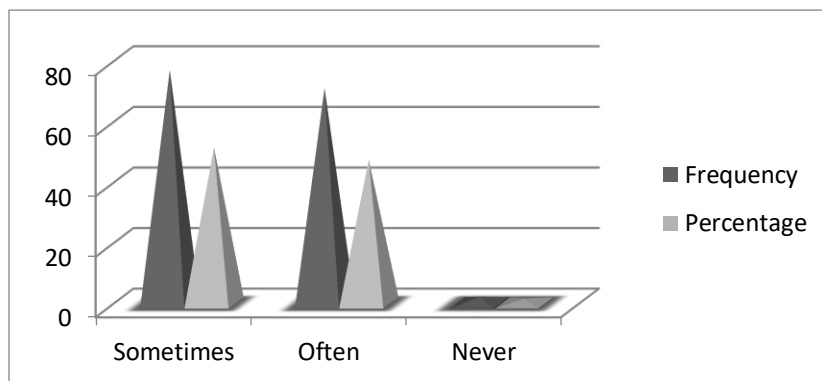


Fig.1

2. "I connect the sound of a new English word and an image of the word to help me remember the word."

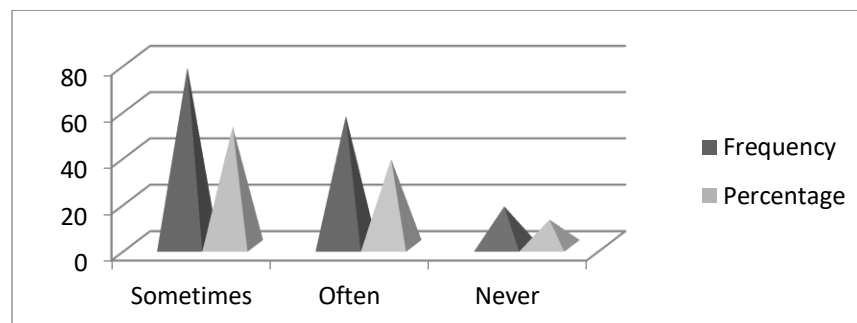


Fig.2

3. "I remember a new word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used."

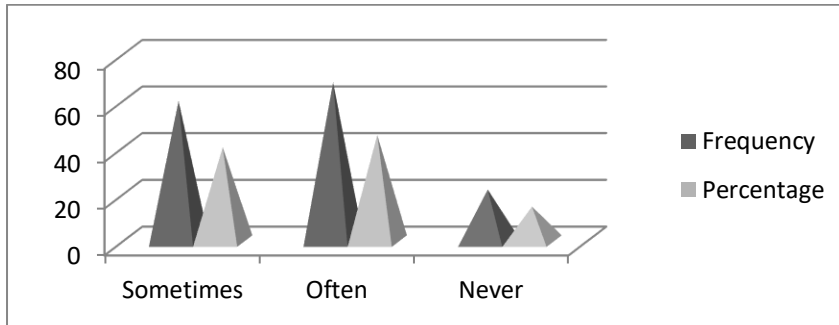


Fig.3

4. "I use rhymes to remember new English words".

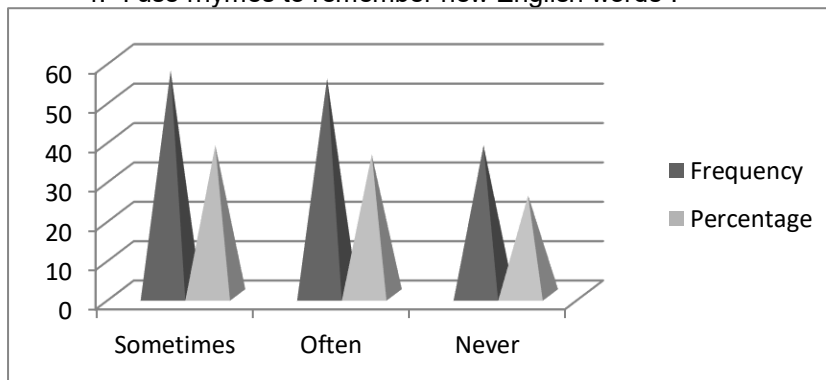


Fig.4

5. "I physically act out new English words."

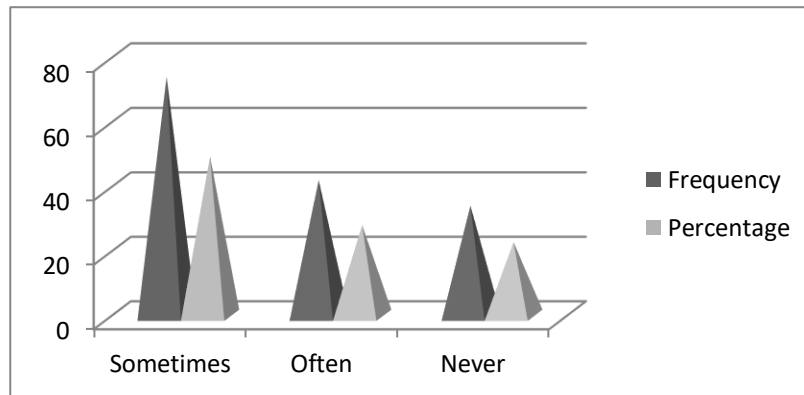


Fig.5

**COGNITIVE STRATEGIES**

Responses to item 6-11 of the questionnaire are given as follows.

The majority of the participants (46.7%, 48.7%, 47.3%, 44% respectively) 'sometimes' use cognitive strategies such as 'writing new words several times', 'talking like native English speaker', 'practicing the sound of English' and 'looking for words in L1 which are similar to the words in

English.’ However, the majority of these participants (56.7% & 52.7%) ‘often’ ‘watch English language TV shows or movies’ and ‘write notes, messages and reports in English.’ The frequencies of different responses against item 6-11 are depicted in the figures below:

6. “I say or write new English words several times.”

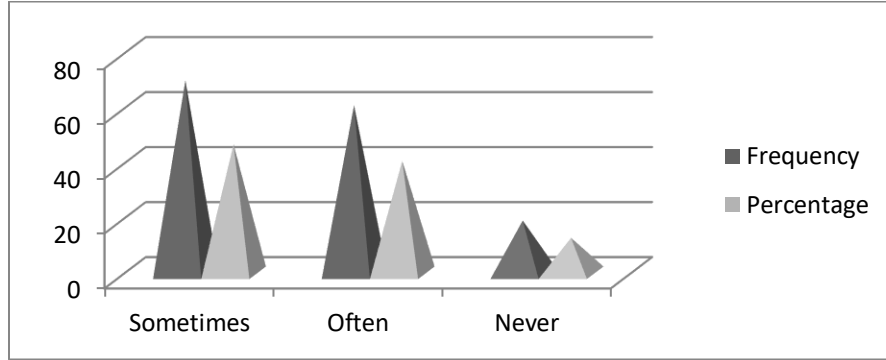


Fig.6

7. “I try to talk like native English speakers.”

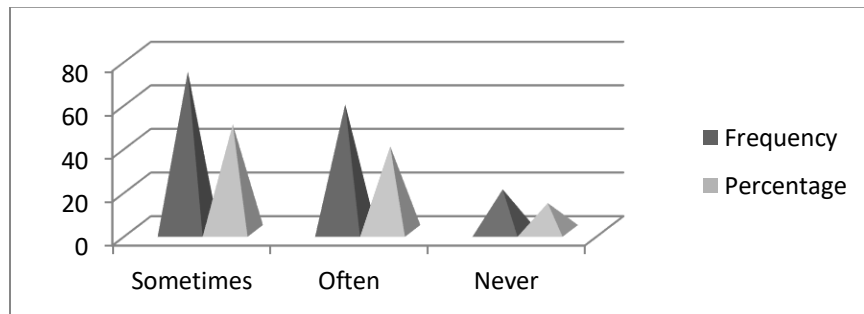


Fig.7

8. “I practice the sounds of English.”

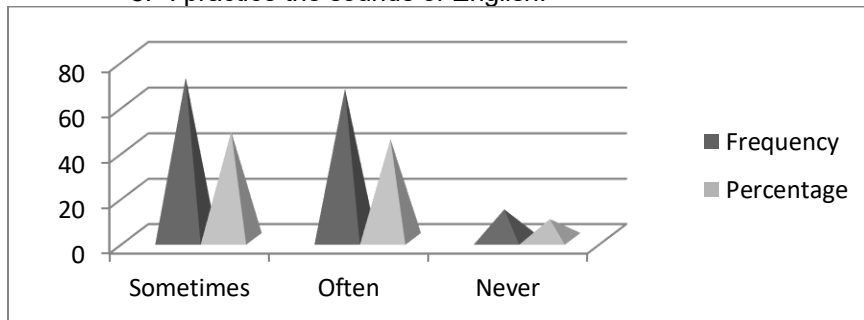


Fig.8

9. "I watch English language TV shows or go to movies spoken in English."

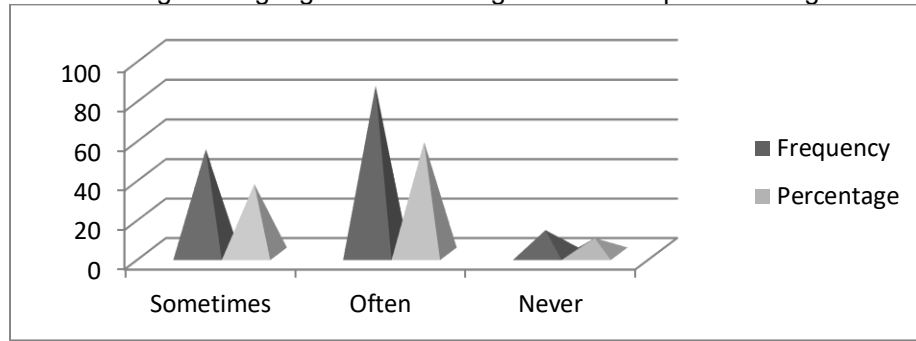


Fig.9

10. "I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English."

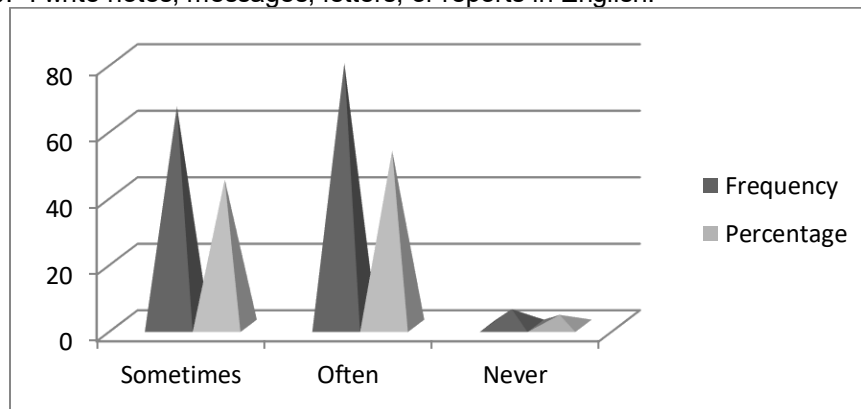


Fig.10

11. "I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English."

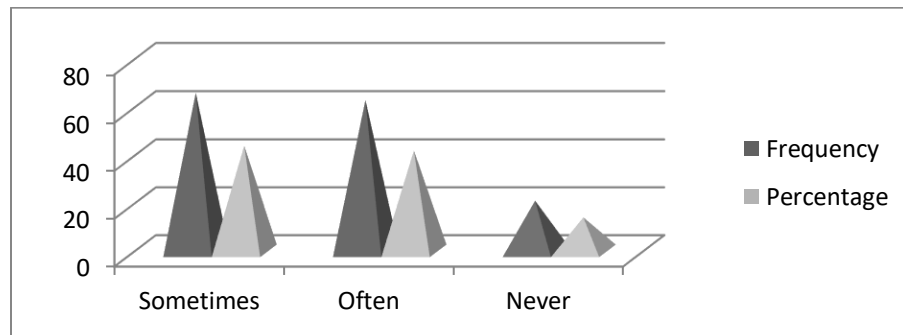


Fig.11

**4.1. COMPENSATION STRATEGIES**

'Sometimes' was the most common response to items of the questionnaire which were related to compensation strategies, i.e. 'using gestures in case of not being able to think a word during a conversation in English', 'making up new words in case of not knowing the right ones in English', 'reading English without looking up every new word' and 'trying to guess what other person

will say next in English' (42%, 48.7%, 49.3% and 49.3% respectively). However, the majority of the participants (46%) reported to 'often' 'understand unfamiliar English words by making guesses.'

12. "When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures."

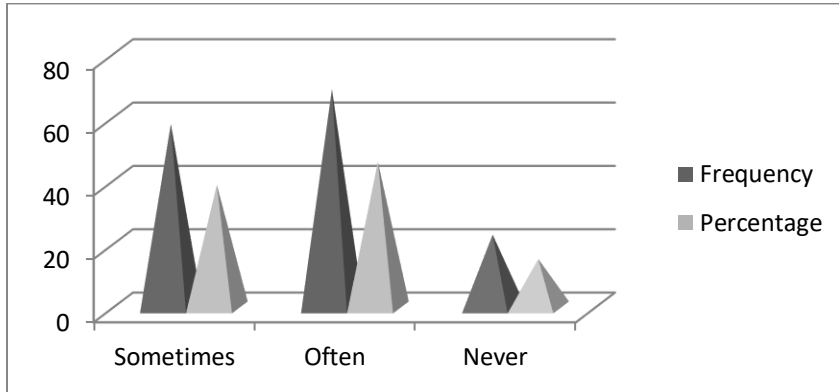


Fig.12

13. "I makeup new words if I do not know the right ones in English."

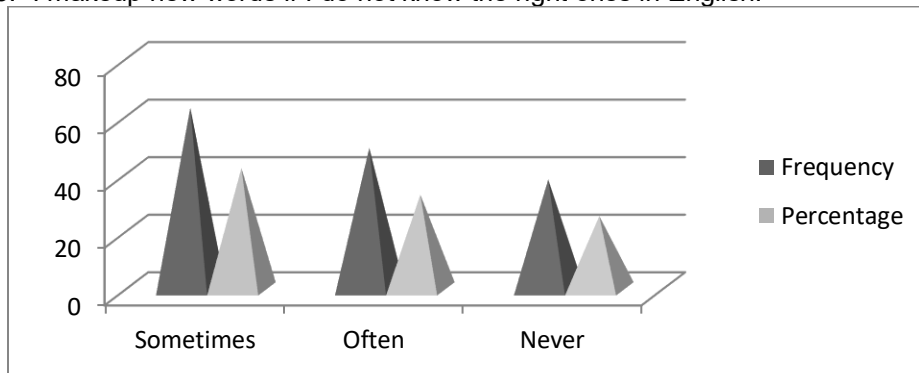


Fig.13

14. "I read English without looking up every new word."

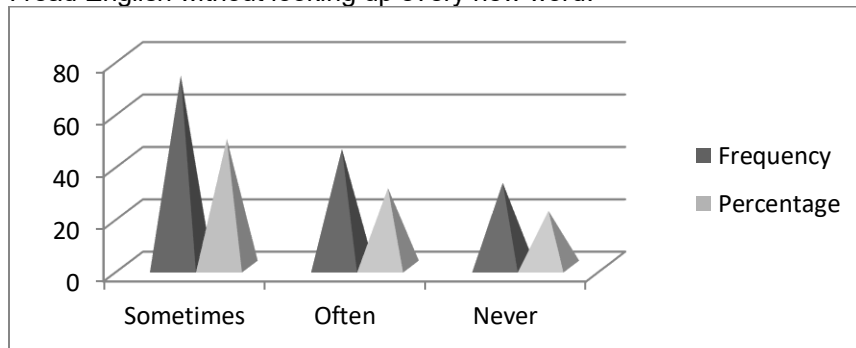


Fig.14

15. "I try to guess what the other person will say next in English."

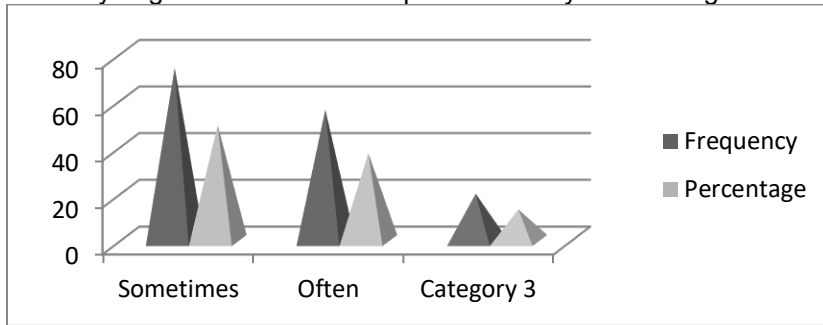


Fig.15

16. "To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses."

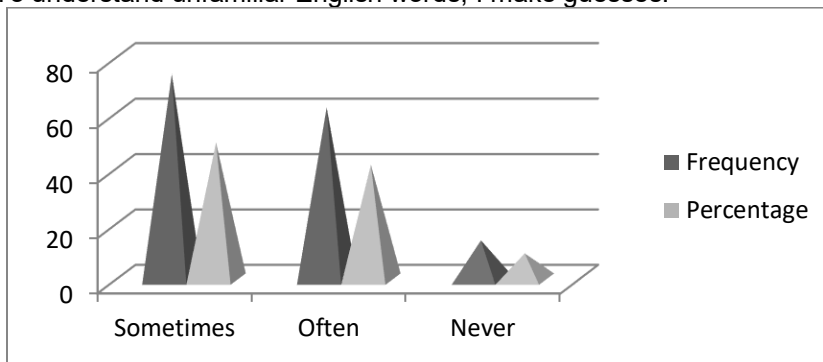


Fig.16

**METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES**

The majority of the participants (60.7%, 64.7% and 60% respectively) 'often' use metacognitive strategies such as 'noticing one's English mistakes and using that information to help oneself do better', 'paying attention when someone is speaking English' and 'trying to find out ways to be better learner of English.' However, in response to other two items i.e. 'planning one's schedule to get enough time for learning English' and 'looking for opportunities to do maximum reading in English', the majority's answer (46% and 47.3% respectively) was 'sometimes'.

17. "I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better."

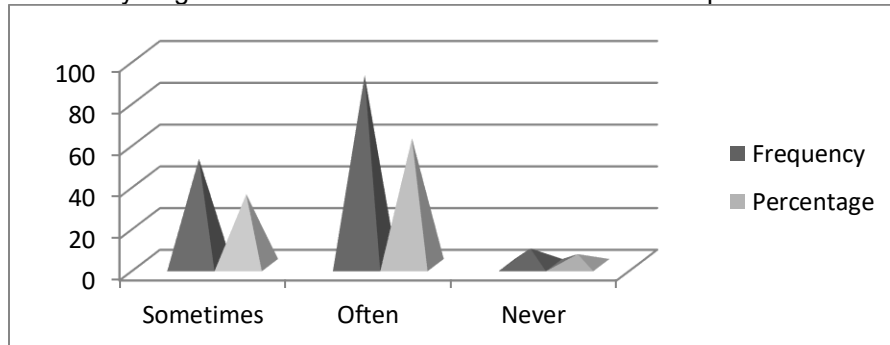


Fig.17

18. "I pay attention when someone is speaking English."

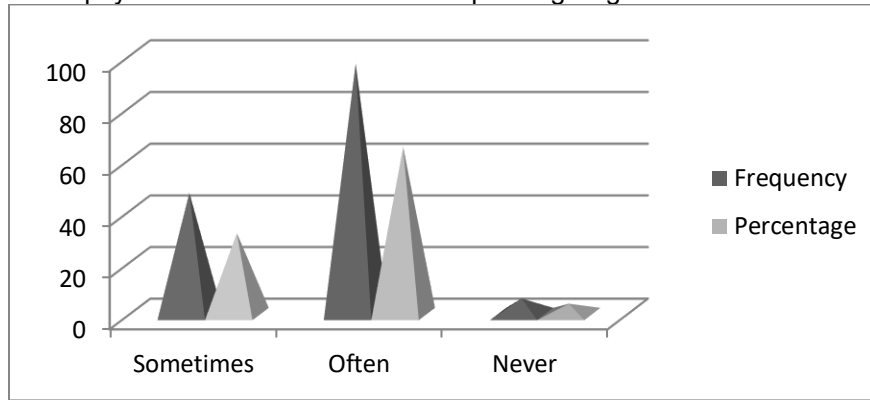


Fig.18

19. "I try to find out how to be a better learner of English."

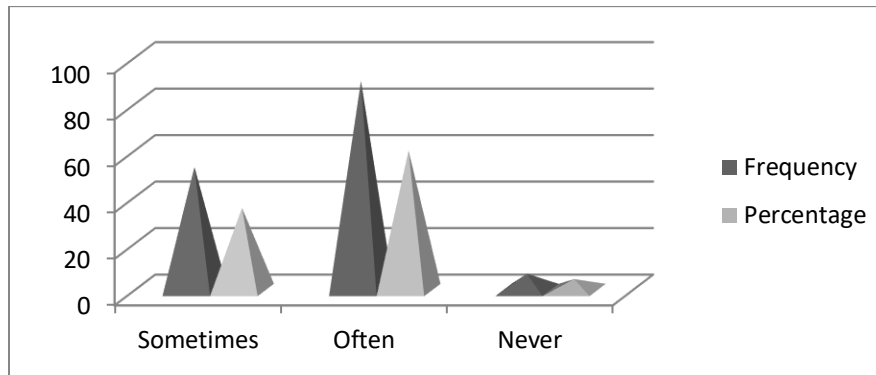


Fig.19

20. "I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English."

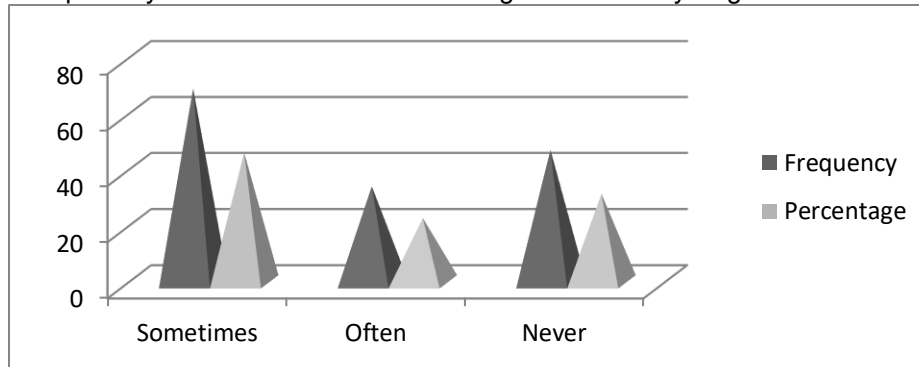


Fig.20

21. "I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English."

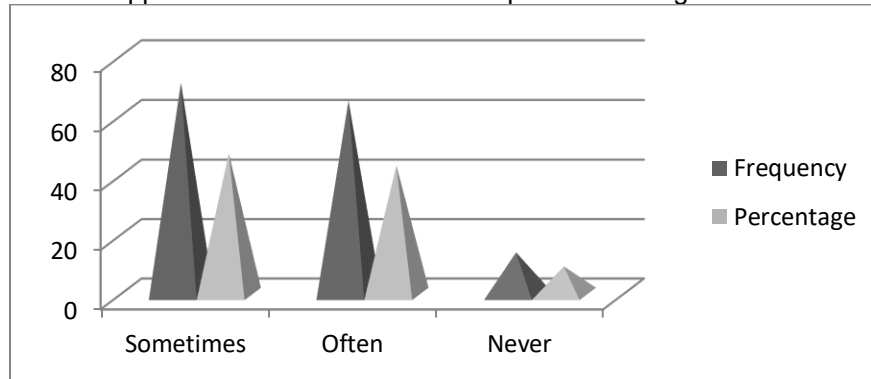


Fig.21

**AFFECTIVE STRAGIES**

Among affective strategies, 'encouraging oneself to speak English when one is afraid of making mistakes', was reported to be used 'often' by the majority of the participants (50%). However, two of the strategies, i.e. 'giving oneself a reward or a treat when one does well in English' and 'writing down one's feelings in a language learning diary' were reported to be 'never' used by majority of the participants (38% and 53.3% respectively). Two other strategies, i.e.' noticing if one is tense or nervous while studying or learning English' and 'talking to someone else about how one feels while learning English are reported to be used 'sometime' by majority of the participants (50% and 41.3% respectively).

22. "I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake."

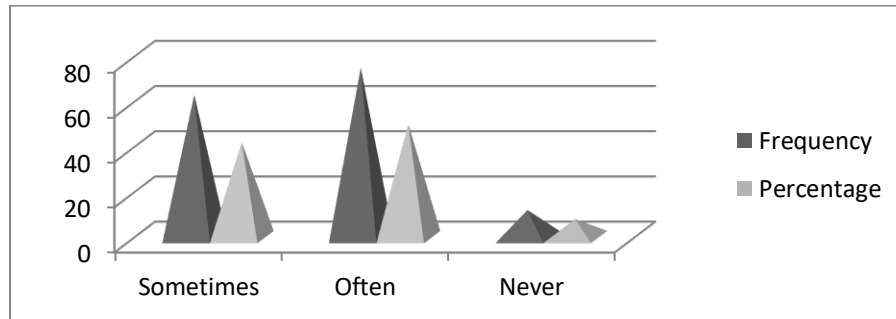


Fig.22

23. "I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English."

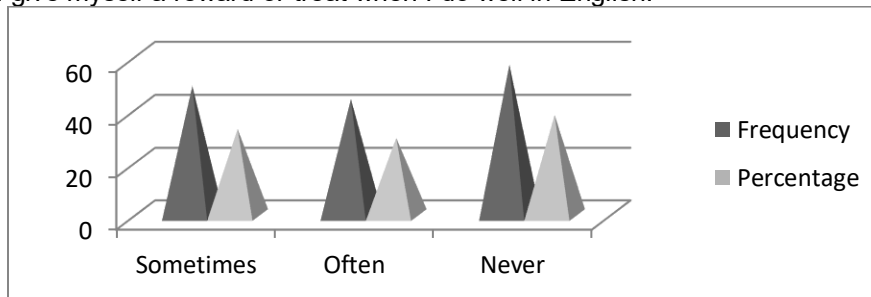


Fig.23

24. "I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English."

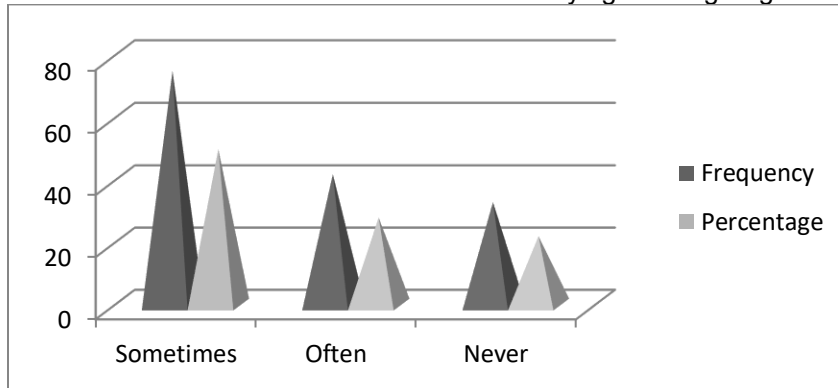


Fig.24

25. "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary."

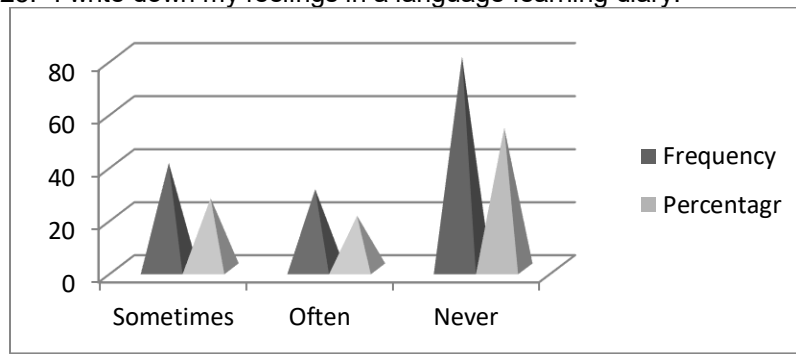


Fig.25

26. "I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English."

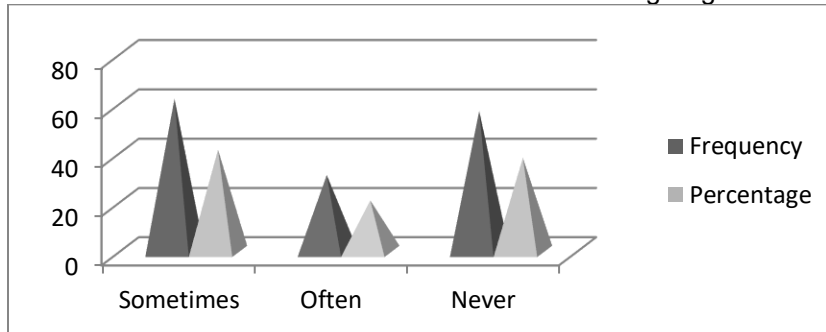


Fig.26

**SOCIAL STRATEGIES**

To all of the items related to social strategies, i.e. 'in case of not being able to understand something in English, asking the other person to slow down and say it again', 'practicing English with other students', 'asking questions in English' and 'trying to learn about the culture of English', the majority of the participants' response (52.7%, 50%, 52.7% and 41.3% respectively) was 'sometime.

27. "If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or to say it again."

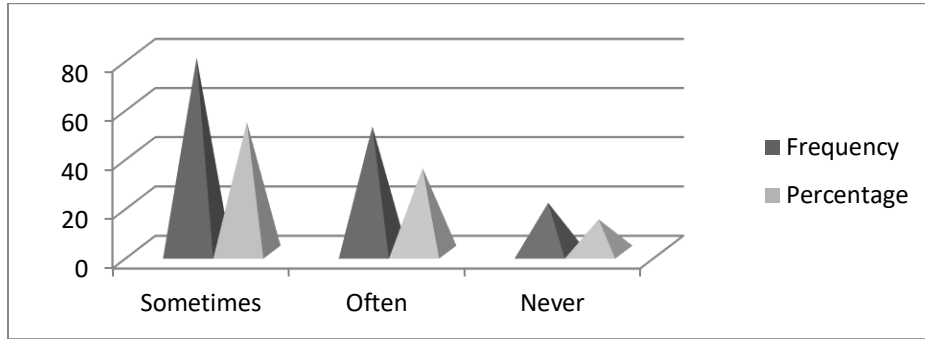


Fig.27

28. "I practice English with other students."

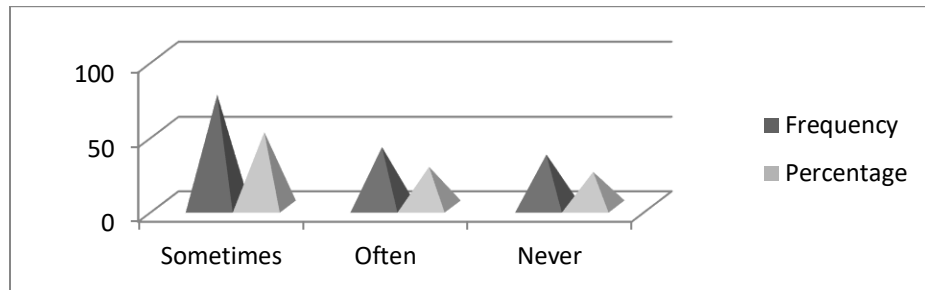


Fig.28

29. "I ask questions in English."

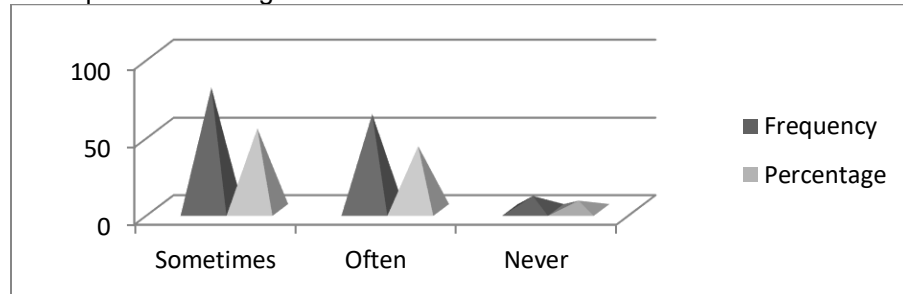


Fig.29

30. "I try to learn about the culture of English speakers."

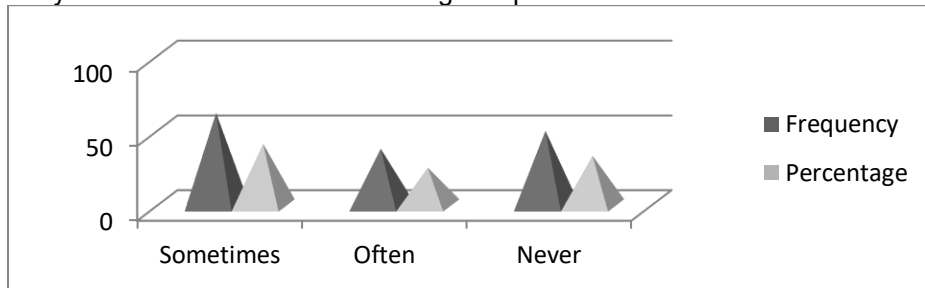


Fig.30

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that most of the learners only 'sometimes' used the memory strategies and most of cognitive strategies while a few cognitive techniques were used 'often' by the students. The findings further exposed that metacognitive skills were in top priority use among the participants. Compensation strategies were used only 'sometime' by most of the participants. Nonetheless, social strategies were generally found to be used only 'sometimes', and affective strategies were generally seen to be quite less frequent, near to 'never' among the participants of our study.

Upon analyzing the LLS used by graduate ESL students at the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, it is inferred that all of the strategies of language learning are adapted by the students to some extent ranging from 'never' to 'often', of which Metacognitive strategies were most commonly used by the students. Similar findings have been reported previously where learning strategies were assessed in different contexts before the Pandemic, and use of Metacognitive strategies was found to be higher as compared to the other strategies (Zimmerman, 2008).

Coming to the comparative frequencies of different language learning strategies, it is already established in view of the findings of our study that most strategies are used only 'sometimes' by the students, however some strategies are used more often than others such as metacognitive strategies are most commonly used, whereas some are at the lowest level of use (namely affective strategies) among the students while learning ESL during Covid-19 era. The findings of frequent use of metacognitive strategies were similar to those of earlier research, such as Han and Lin (2000) and Nisbet (2002). This research is important because it may be used to provide future guidelines for the use of language, specifically English and learning techniques that students might adopt to help them learn English as an L2 more effectively.

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