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# The Impact of Learning Context on the Use of Learning Strategies by Sudanese EFL Learners

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## Abstract

*This study investigated the impact of learning context— specifically classroom versus distance learning context— on language learning strategy use among Sudanese EFL learners. Fifty-four-item Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) adapted by Ibrahim (2022) was administered to 219 students (110 classroom students and 109 distance students) enrolled in English language program in a dual-mode university. The results showed significant differences in overall learning strategy use between classroom and distance students, in favor of classroom students. In addition, classroom students excelled their distance peers in the use of memory, cognitive and social strategies. In contrast, distance students showed greater preference for metacognitive and compensatory strategies than did the classroom students. The findings underscored the significant influence of learning context on strategic behavior and pointed to the need of context-sensitive support in strategy instruction. The study concluded with pedagogical implications for enhancing the efficiency of language learning in both classroom and distance settings.*

Keywords: Language learning strategies, learning context, classroom learning and distance learning

## المستخلص

هدفت الدراسة إلى التحقق من تأثير بيئة الدراسة، وبصفة خاصة الدراسة النظامية مقابل الدراسة عن بُعد، على استخدام استراتيجيات التعلم لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في السودان. وزعت استبانة اوكسفورد (١٩٩٠) لاستراتيجيات تعلم اللغة والتي عدّلها إبراهيم (٢٠٢٢) على عينة مكونة من ٢١٩ طالباً (١١٠ منهم طلاب نظامين ١٠٩ طلاب دراسة عن بُعد) ملتحقين ببرنامج اللغة الإنجليزية في إحدى الجامعات ذات الدراسة المزدوجة. أشارت النتائج إلى وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في استخدام استراتيجيات التعلم بصورة عامة وذلك لصالح الطلاب النظامين. إضافة إلى ذلك، استخدم الطلاب النظاميون استراتيجيات الذاكرة والاستراتيجيات المعرفية والاجتماعية أكثر من أقرانهم في برنامج الدراسة عن بُعد، بينما أظهر طلاب الدراسة عن بُعد تفضيلاً أكبر لاستخدام الاستراتيجيات فوق المعرفية والاستراتيجيات التعويضية مقارنة بالطلاب النظامين. كما كشفت الدراسة عن وجود تأثير جوهري لبيئة التعلم على السلوك الاستراتيجي لدى المتعلمين، مما يؤكد على أهمية مراعاة العوامل البيئية عند تصميم برامج تدريب على استراتيجيات تعلم اللغة. وخلصت الدراسة إلى تقديم مقترحات تربوية تسهم في تعزيز فاعلية تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلٍّ من بيئتي الدراسة النظامية والدراسة عن بُعد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات تعلم اللغة، بيئة التعلم، الدراسة النظامية، الدراسة عن بُعد

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the study of language learning strategies (LLSs) has emerged as a key area within the broader field of second and foreign language acquisition. As global communication increasingly demands proficiency in English, understanding how learners approach language learning has become an educational and research priority, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). The strategic behaviors that learners employ -whether consciously or unconsciously- can significantly influence their language development. These behaviors, commonly referred to as language learning strategies, are often described as purposeful, goal-directed actions that learners use to facilitate comprehension, retention, and production of the target language (Oxford, 1990). However, the use and efficiency of these strategies are not uniform; they are shaped by a range of individual and contextual factors, including the learning milieu.

Among the many variables affecting the use of LLSs, learning context has recently garnered increasing scholarly attention. With the diversification of educational delivery modes, particularly the expansion of distance learning programs alongside traditional classroom instruction, learners today are engaging with language in vastly different settings. Each context presents its own set of affordances and constraints, influencing learners' access to resources, modes of interaction, levels of autonomy, and opportunities for feedback. Traditional in-class settings typically offer direct teacher guidance, peer collaboration, and immediate corrective input—conditions conducive to the use of social and cognitive strategies. In contrast, distance learning environments often demand greater learner autonomy, digital competence, and self-regulation, leading to a higher reliance on metacognitive and compensatory strategies (Hurd, 2006; Anderson, 2002).

In recent years, Sudan has witnessed a notable increase in distance education programs due to infrastructural limitations and growing educational demand. Despite this shift, little is known about how learners go about language learning in these different settings—specifically, how they adopt or adjust their learning strategies depending on whether they are enrolled in traditional in-class programs or remote, digitally mediated ones. Most existing research in Sudan has focused on language proficiency levels, teacher qualifications, curriculum content, or learner attitudes, while studies investigating the role of learning context in shaping language learning strategy use remain scarce (Ibrahim, 2022).

This study aims to examine the impact of learning context—specifically, in-class versus distance learning—on the use of language learning strategies among Sudanese EFL learners. Using a quantitative research design and a version of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) adapted by

Ibrahim (2018), the study seeks to identify patterns of strategy use across contexts and to explore the relationship between context and strategic engagement. By doing so, the research intends to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of learner behavior in diverse instructional settings and to provide insights for EFL educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers working to improve language learning outcomes in Sudan and similar educational environments.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Language Learning Strategies: Definitions and Theoretical Foundations*

The study of language learning strategies (LLSs) has evolved into a significant subfield within second and foreign language acquisition research. While early theorists sought to understand how learners acquire additional languages, later researchers emphasized the strategic behaviors that learners employ to facilitate this process. Oxford (1990) proposed one of the most widely accepted frameworks, suggesting that language learning strategies are deliberate, goal-directed actions that enhance the learning and use of a second or foreign language. These strategies are not random; rather, they are used by learners to control and direct their cognitive, affective, and social engagement with the language learning process.

The taxonomy provided by Oxford categorizes strategies into six broad types: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Each of these types plays a distinct role in supporting various aspects of language acquisition. For example, cognitive strategies involve practicing and manipulating the language, while metacognitive strategies enable learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. The importance of these strategies is underscored by empirical studies suggesting that more proficient language learners tend to use a wider range of strategies more frequently and more appropriately than less successful learners (Chamot, 2005; Griffiths, 2008). It is now widely accepted that strategic competence contributes to learner autonomy, motivation, and overall language achievement.

While definitions of LLSs vary slightly across scholars, there is general agreement that strategies are not inherently effective or ineffective; rather, their value depends on contextual factors such as the learner's goals, the specific task at hand, and the broader learning environment. Researchers such as Cohen (1998) have emphasized that the relationship between strategy use and learning outcomes is dynamic and mediated by both internal and external variables. Therefore, understanding how learners choose and apply strategies within particular educational settings has become a focal point for recent studies.

## ***Contextual Factors Influencing Learning Strategy Use***

Language learning does not occur in a vacuum. The strategies learners use are shaped by a complex interplay of contextual factors, including but not limited to age, gender, cultural background, proficiency level, learning style, and motivation. One of the increasingly examined variables in this regard is the learning context, which encompasses the physical or virtual setting in which language instruction takes place, the mode of delivery (e.g., face-to-face vs. online), and the nature of teacher-learner and peer interactions.

Although numerous studies have examined how gender or proficiency level influences strategy use (Griffiths, 2003; Oxford, 2011), learning context is still an emerging area of focus. Scholars have noted that the setting of language learning—whether structured and teacher-led or autonomous and learner-driven—plays a critical role in shaping learners' strategic choices. Learners in more controlled, classroom-based environments often benefit from the presence of peers and instructors, which may encourage the use of social and cognitive strategies. In contrast, learners in distance education environments may find themselves relying more heavily on metacognitive strategies due to the reduced immediacy of support and interaction.

The shift in attention toward context stems from the recognition that strategy use is not a fixed attribute of individual learners but a dynamic response to their learning circumstances. This view aligns with sociocultural theories of learning, which suggest that cognition and learning are embedded within social practices and environmental structures (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Thus, it becomes imperative to explore how different learning contexts facilitate or constrain learners' ability to engage in effective strategy use.

### ***Face-to-Face vs. Distance Learning Contexts***

The differences between in-class and distance learning contexts are not merely logistical but pedagogical and psychological as well. Traditional classroom environments are typically characterized by structured schedules, direct teacher supervision, and real-time interaction, all of which tend to support immediate feedback, cooperative learning, and social engagement. These features create opportunities for learners to adopt and refine cognitive and social strategies through interaction, clarification requests, and collaborative tasks.

Conversely, distance learning environments are often less structured, requiring students to manage their own schedules, locate resources independently, and sustain motivation over time without the physical presence of instructors or

classmates. As a result, distance learners often rely more on metacognitive strategies such as planning, goal-setting, self-monitoring, and evaluating progress. This reliance on self-regulation has been observed in several empirical studies. For instance, Anderson (2002) found that learners in online programs reported significantly more use of planning and self-monitoring strategies compared to those in face-to-face settings. Similar findings were reported by Lai and Gu (2011), who noted that the autonomy demanded by online learning environments prompts learners to develop more sophisticated mechanisms for regulating their own learning.

These observations are supported by White (2003), who argued that the learning environment itself mediates not only the opportunities available to learners but also the nature of their engagement. In her view, the context is not a passive backdrop but an active component that shapes learners' behaviors and choices. Therefore, it becomes crucial to examine how different contexts influence learners' use of strategies, particularly in under-researched settings such as Sudan.

### ***Empirical Insights from EFL and ESL Contexts***

Several studies have documented how learning strategies vary across educational contexts in various EFL and ESL settings. Alhaisoni (2012), in a study involving Saudi university students, reported that learners in traditional classes favored memory and social strategies, likely due to the collaborative nature of classroom learning. In contrast, those in distance learning settings employed metacognitive and compensation strategies more frequently, reflecting their need to navigate learning challenges independently.

Similarly, Habók and Magyar (2018), in a Hungarian context, found that the learning environment significantly influenced learners' strategy choices. Their study highlighted that classroom learners often benefited from structured tasks that promoted the use of direct strategies, whereas online learners had to rely more on indirect strategies to self-manage and self-motivate. These findings suggest that context-specific constraints and affordances significantly determine which strategies learners find most useful and applicable.

Despite the growing body of international research, there remains a dearth of empirical studies exploring this issue in African EFL contexts, and particularly in Sudan. Much of the existing Sudanese research has focused on broader challenges facing EFL learners, such as curriculum adequacy, teacher training, and linguistic difficulties (Mohamed, 2014). While these studies provide valuable insights into the general conditions of English learning in Sudan, they have not sufficiently addressed the role of strategy use within different learning environments.

## ***Learning Strategy Use in the Sudanese EFL Context***

The Sudanese educational system has witnessed a significant increase in both in-class and distance learning programs, particularly in response to infrastructural limitations and growing demand for higher education access. However, there is limited understanding of how these contexts shape learners' strategic behavior. Ibrahim (2022), in his adaptation of Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) for Sudanese learners, provided some foundational insights into strategy preferences among university students. His findings suggested moderate use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies across the board but did not differentiate based on learning context. This leaves an important empirical gap in the literature.

The need to explore this area is further underscored by the challenges facing distance learners in Sudan, including limited internet access, lack of consistent feedback, and reduced opportunities for social interaction. These conditions may force learners to depend more heavily on self-regulatory strategies, even though they may not have been adequately trained or prepared for such independent learning. As Mohamed (2014) has observed, Sudanese distance learners often struggle with isolation and motivation, which are factors likely to influence their use—or neglect—of strategic approaches.

Given these contextual dynamics, it becomes critical to investigate whether Sudanese EFL learners in traditional classroom environments differ in their strategy use from those enrolled in distance programs. Understanding such differences could offer valuable insights into how educators and policymakers can better support learners across both contexts.

### **3. Method**

#### **Subjects**

Initially, a total of 240 students enrolled in a dual-mode language program were recruited to take part in this study. Twenty-one of them were excluded from the analysis due to absenteeism, resulting in a final sample of 219 students (110 classroom and 109 distance learners). Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure balanced representation in terms of gender, age and English proficiency level. At the time of data collection, the participants had about nine years of formal English learning experience: four years in basic education, three years in secondary school and two years at the university level.

## **Instrument**

A version of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) adapted by Ibrahim (2018) was adopted in this study. The adapted SILL is a self-rating questionnaire survey consisting of 54 items. Each of these items is an "I do..." statement (e.g. I try to translate English sentences word for word to understand them) which requires the respondents to indicate the frequency of its use on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 never or almost never true of me, 2 generally not true of me, 3 somewhat never true of me, 4 generally never true of me, and 5 always or almost true of me. The SILL questionnaire comprises 54 items grouped into six domains based on Oxford's (1990) classification scheme: Memory strategies (items 1- 12), cognitive strategies (items 13- 26), compensation strategies (items 27- 32), metacognitive strategies (items 33- 43), affective strategies (items 44- 47), and social strategies (items 48- 54).

## **Procedure**

Prior to the distribution of the SILL, respondents were briefed on the purpose of the study and they were shown how to report on the frequency of strategy use. In addition, the students were told that there were no right and wrong answers to the statements, that they should respond as honestly and accurately as possible, and that their responses would remain confidential. The distribution and collection of the SILL was administered by the researcher himself. Data collection took a fifteen-day period during the first academic term of 2024-2025. The adapted SILL was translated into the subjects' mother tongue to "maximize ease of administration and ensure greater accuracy of results, especially with the less advanced students" (Oxford, 1990, p. 270).

## **Data Analysis**

Due its capability to handle huge volume of data and conduct various types of analyses, the SPSS version 16.0 was utilized for the data analysis. Upon verifying that all of the questionnaire responses were complete and mistake-free, they were coded and entered into the SPSS for processing. To ensure appropriate and accurate analysis of data, an expert statistician was consulted for guidance and a review of proposed statistical analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. The descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviation, frequencies and percentages, were utilized to characterize the sample in regards to mode of study as well as to identify patterns of learning strategy use. Inferential statistics applied in this study intended to test the effect of learning context on students' mean strategy use across the entire SILL and in the six SILL categories as well as in each of the 54 SILL items. The inferential statistics tests used in the present

research include: One-way analysis of variance (*ANOVA*), post hoc tests, and chi-square tests. An important point to note here is that the minimum level of significance predetermined for the tests applied throughout the survey in this investigation is  $p < .05$ . This level of significance,  $< .05$ , means that the probability of such results occurring by random error is less than 5 in 100.

#### 4. Results

Results of the *ANOVA* in Table 1 revealed statistically significant differences ( $p < .009$ ) in overall learning strategy use between classroom and distance students, in favor of classroom students. That is, the overall SILL mean for classroom students was higher ( $M = 3.61$ ) than for distance students ( $M = 3.32$ ). It is interesting to note that the mean score for classroom students was in the high-use range ( $M = 3.50+$ ) and that for distance students fell within the medium-use ( $M = 2.5-3.5$ ) range (see Fig. 1)

Table1: Differences in Overall Strategy Use by Mode of Study

Mode of Study	Mean	SD	Sig.	Pattern of variation
Classroom	3.61	.95	.009	Classroom > Distance
Distance	3.32	1.02		



Fig. 1 Means of Overall Strategy Use by Mode of Study

The data in Table 2 showed significant differences between classroom and distance students in use of five of the six SILL categories (all but not affective strategies). The strategic differences between the two groups of students are graphically illustrated in Fig. 2.

Table 2: Differences in Use of Strategy Categories by Mode of Study

Strategy Category	Classroom		Distance		Sig.	Post hoc Sheffe test
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Memory	3.61	.89	2.85	1.19	.000	Classroom > Distance
Cognitive	3.87	.75	2.47	.93	.002	Classroom > Distance

<b>Compensation</b>	3.23	1.21	3.69	.98	.019	Classroom < Distance
<b>Metacognitive</b>	2.89	.99	3.29	.82	.013	Classroom < Distance
<b>Affective</b>	3.32	.92	3.10	.98	.159	-
<b>Social</b>	3.52	.97	2.42	1.27	.000	Classroom > Distance

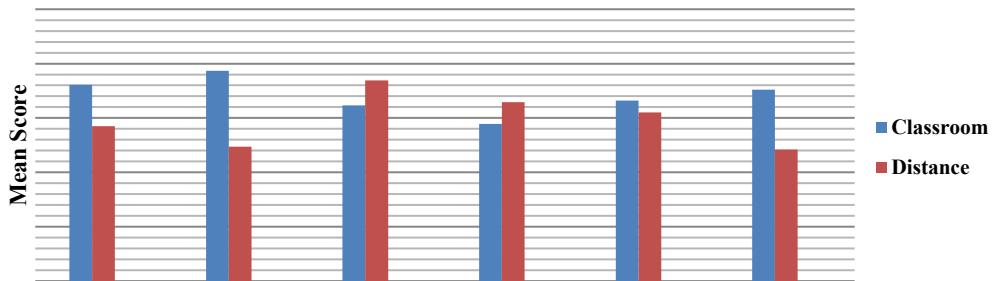


Fig. 2: Means of Strategy Categories Used by Classroom and Distance Students

Of the five SILL categories showing variation by mode of learning, three; i.e. memory, cognitive and social, were used significantly more frequently by classroom students than by their distance counterparts. Interestingly, these SILL categories were reportedly used at a high rate of frequency (M= 3.5+) by classroom students while distance learners reported using memory category at a moderate rate (M= 2.5 -3.5) and cognitive and social categories at a low rate of frequency (M= less than 2.5).

Distance students, on the other hand, reported much greater use of two strategy categories: compensation and metacognitive than classroom students did. It is important to note that compensation was the only strategy category reportedly used at a high rate of frequency by distance students. This would appear to indicate that distance learners are much more likely to take charge of their own learning and make up for missing knowledge in the target language, thereby becoming self-regulated autonomous language learners.

No significant differences were highlighted between classroom and distance students in terms of using affective strategies. This suggests that the students in this study, irrespective of their mode of learning, tend to use affective strategies at a more or less the same frequency level. That is to say, mode of study seems not to affect students’ use of affective strategies overall.

The Chi-square tests demonstrated that about one-third of the SILL items (15 out of 54) showed significant variation according to mode of study. These strategies are listed in Table 3 and shown graphically in Figure 3.

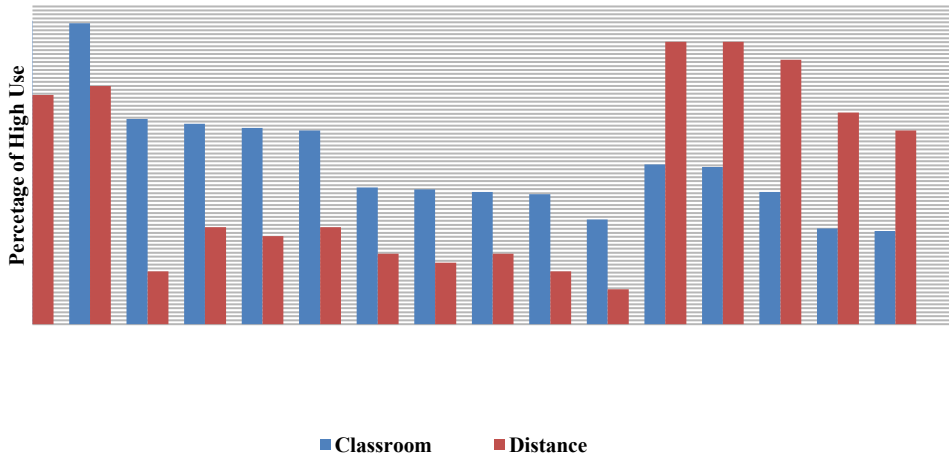


Fig 3: Percentage of High Use of SILL Items Showing Variation by Mode of Study

Table 3: Items Showing Significant Variation by Mode of Study

Strategy Items		% of High Use (4 or 5)		Observed $\chi^2$
		Classroom	Distance	
<b><u>Strategies employed significantly more frequently by classroom students</u></b>				
MEM\11	I try to get into the habit of reviewing English before examination	77.0	23.8	67.6
MEM\5	I review English lessons often	76.4	48.8	16.3
MET\43	I do a lot of mock exams in English before the final exam	75.8	29.5	44.5
SOC\53	I look for help from my teacher when I have difficulties in English learning	75.8	51.9	15.2
COG\26	I use dictionaries to check the meaning of a new word either in English or Arabic	54.7	27.3	25.7
SOC\52	I engage in classroom activities in English classes	51.7	13.3	37.4
MEM\2	I use new English words in a	51.2	17.7	25.6

	sentence so I can remember them			
<b>SOC\49</b>	I practice English with other students	57.4	41.7	11.0
<b>COG\17</b>	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English	42.6	26.7	16.0
<b><u>Strategies employed significantly more frequently by distance students</u></b>				
<b>COM\30</b>	I read English without looking up every new word	20.1	60.7	34.8
<b>AFF\47</b>	I carry on reading even when I encounter challenging language points in English reading	34.2	66.6	33.5
<b>MET\37</b>	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English	27.1	54.1	15.5
<b>COM\28</b>	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses	26.4	51.9	13.7
<b>MET\42</b>	I browse the internet to find information I need in English	23.5	48.8	20.7

**Note: Critical value of  $\chi^2 = 5.99$  ( $df = 2$ ),  $P < 0.05$**

Of the 15 strategy items showing significant variation by mode of study, nine strategies were used more often by classroom students than by distance students. In terms of using these strategies, slightly more than three-quarters of classroom students reported high use of four strategies: reviewing English materials (Items 11 and 5 with  $\chi^2 = 67.6$  and  $16.3$ ), evaluating one's learning (Item 43 with  $\chi^2 = 44.5$ ) and seeking help from the teacher (Item 53 with  $\chi^2 = 15.2$ ). A percentage of 54.7 of classroom students, twice the percentage of distance students, reported looking up new words in a dictionary (Item 26 with  $\chi^2 = 25.7$ ). About half of classroom students, while less than one-fifth of distance students, did also report high use of two strategies. These strategies involve participating actively in classroom discussions (Item 52 with  $\chi^2 = 37.4$ ) and placing new words in a context (Item 2 with  $\chi^2 = 25.6$ ). Additionally, classroom students outperformed their distance counterparts by about 15% in reporting high use of two strategies for practicing speaking and writing skills through actual communication (Items 49 and 17 with  $\chi^2 = 11.0$  and  $16.0$  respectively).

Distance students, on the other hand, outperformed their classroom counterparts in using five strategies. with regarding the use of the strategies favored by distance learners, a percentage of 60.7 of distance students, almost thrice the percentage of classroom students, reported high use of the strategy of reading English texts without looking up every new word (Item 30 with  $\chi^2 = 34.8$ ). Fully two-thirds of distance learners, compared to only one-third of classroom students,

did also report making high use of the strategy of encouraging oneself to keep reading despite the obstacles (Item 47 with  $x^2= 33.5$ ). Moreover, distance students outnumbered their classroom peers by about two to one in employing three strategies: figuring out the meaning of new words through guessing (Item 28 with  $x^2= 13.7$ ), maximizing one's exposure to the target language and arranging and planning one's learning (Items 37 and 42 with  $x^2= 15.5$  and  $20.7$  respectively). It is interesting to note that about half of the strategies favoring distance students fall within metacognitive strategy category, suggesting that distance learners are more aware of the significance of metacognitive strategies in open and distance context.

## 5. Discussion

Results from the SILL questionnaire indicate that mode of study had a considerable influence on the use of learning strategies. The overall usage of strategies showed significant variability by mode of study in favor of classroom students. The increased use of learning strategies by classroom students can be attributed to their greater exposure to the language in the classroom. As full-time learners, classroom students are required to attend English classes and do homework assignments and therefore are more likely to resort to special devices in order to tackle learning tasks inside and outside the classroom. This result is inconsistent with those of other studies where mode of study exerted no influence on usage of overall strategies (White, 1995; Alptekin 2007); however, it confirms Hsiao and Oxford's (2002) observation that a relationship might exist between mode of learning and learning strategy use. Differences in findings could be due to other factors that could be interrelated with mode of learning like context and time devoted for language learning.

More complex patterns of use emerged between classroom and distance students when the use of learning strategies at the category level is considered. Mode of study showed a significant effect on the use of compensation strategies, with distance students using these strategies significantly more often than classroom students. This indicates that more of the distance learners than classroom students tended to use the language despite the gaps in their target language knowledge and skills. The students' tendency for using compensation strategies is closely associated with their learning context (Riazi & Rahimi, 2005). Distance learners in this study tended to resort more to compensation means as a strategic competence in order to go through language learning processes in a context where there is little formal exposure to the target language.

Distance students also exhibited significantly greater use of metacognitive strategies, which involve setting goals and objectives, planning for a language task, evaluating one's progress, and so on. The frequent application of metacognitive

strategies by distance students can be perceived as a response to the requirements placed on those students by distance learning environment. It is a must for distance learner to develop the ability to regulate their learning processes, since their learning environment does not provide the kind of support and guidance which are customarily furnished by a classroom context. In this regard, White (2008) remarked that distance learning entails high levels of student control and direction. Distance students in this study met the demands of distance learning milieu by the frequent use of metacognitive strategies to plan, monitor and assess their language learning processes. Accordingly, one could conclude that distance learners are much more likely to take charge of their own learning, thereby becoming self-regulated and autonomous language learners. This confirms Hurd's (2000) observation about the significance of metacognitive strategies for L2 learners in open and distance contexts. Our finding that distance students tended to pay more attention and take control of their own learning mirrors that of White (1995) who found that distance learners tended to use metacognitive strategies more often than on-campus students.

Another important finding emerged from the data was that classroom students tended to use social strategies significantly more frequently than their distance counterparts. This implies enough evidence to suggest that the status of social presence in language learning context had a profound influence on usage of social strategies. The physical presence has an important role to play in establishing a positive social climate and cohesion within the class (White, 2003). Hence, being in closer contact with peers and language instructors, students in classroom context are likely to cultivate social strategies. The reduction in teacher immediacy and absence of physical presence adversely affect distance students' interaction with other English speakers and thus eliminate the possibility of using social strategies. The finding that classroom students tend to utilize social strategies more significantly is in direct contradiction to that of Alptekin (2007) who found that non-tutored students tended to make much greater use of socially-based strategies than did their tutored peers. Such conflicting results could be reconciled by referring to the contexts of and the participants in the two studies. Non-tutored students in Alptekin's study were learners of Turkish in L2 context and tutored students were learners of English in foreign language setting whereas both classroom and distance students in the present study were learners of English in foreign language context. Due to the availability of interaction opportunities, the non-tutored students in L2 context are far more likely to use social strategies in language learning.

Once again, classroom students scored significantly higher than distance learners in terms of cognitive and memory strategies. These findings partially support those of White (1995), which indicated more frequent use of cognitive strategies by classroom students than by distance learners, but contradict with those of Alptekin (2007). However, the higher usage of these strategies indicates that

classroom students are more likely to actively and cognitively engage with the material to be learned and this may result in direct involvement of learners with the target language. This could be related to the fact that, as full-time learners, classroom students tend to spend more time in conventional in-class activities and this could have maximized their opportunities to practice and use what they have learned in their English classes either through speaking or writing. Or it may well be due to the instructional delivery systems used in classroom settings in the present context of this study, which are didactic and rote based in style (Yeddi, 2003). It is also possible that the lack of access to classroom reviews and tests in distance learning context may have adversely affected distance learners' use of cognitive and memory-related strategies. That being said, these are just speculations that need to be confirmed by future researchers.

The finding that there was no significant difference in the use of affective strategies between classroom and distance students is inconsistent with findings of Alptekin (2007) and White (1995). Yet, considering the mean scores for affective strategies, classroom students seem to report higher use of these strategies compared to distance learners (respectively,  $M= 3.32$ . and  $M= 3.10$ ). This may suggest that classroom students are a little more likely to control their emotions, attitudes, and motivations in language learning processes. The less affective control exhibited by distance students may be related to the "absence of exposure to public criticism; lack of competition and peer pressure; and the chance to practice and make mistakes in private" in distance learning contexts (Hurd, 2008; p. 223). In classroom contexts, on the other hand, students are usually supposed to give lectures and presentations, and that giving a presentation in front of a group of classmates creates anxiety in the individual, let alone having to do it in a foreign language over which they do not have enough mastery. That might be the reason why the students in classroom mode were little more concerned about and paid little more attention to affective factors.

At the specific strategy level, significant differences between classroom and distance students occurred for 14 SILL items. Of the 14 items, nine were used significantly more often by classroom students, and six strategies were reported to be used more frequently by distance students (see Table 3). Among the eight strategies favored by classroom students, three were social strategies, namely seeking help from the teacher (Item 53), practicing English with classmates (Item 49), and engaging in classroom activities (Item 52). The greater use of such strategies among classroom students was quite predictable as these strategies are closely related to classroom contexts than to distance settings. These findings confirm White's (2008) conclusion that isolation from a learning group, as in the case of distance students, has a negative impact on learners' interactional behaviors and language production.

The strategies of reviewing English lessons often (Item 5), dictionary consultation (Item 26), and getting into the habit of reviewing English before examination (Item 11), too, were used significantly more frequently by classroom students than by distance learners. Given the time-consuming nature of these strategies, the sporadic use of such strategies by distance learners is not unexpected because the majority of distance learners, unlike classroom students who usually devote all their time to studying, have multiple responsibilities such as jobs, family, and other commitments which compete for their time and attention. Even though the qualitative data did not completely support all these results, clear differences in a dictionary look-up behavior were observed. For instance, compared to distance learners, classroom students generally used dictionaries more often and they tended to use them for a wider range of purposes. The reasons distance learners gave for not using dictionaries frequently are that dictionary consultation hinders learners' natural reading process, and it takes a long time to look up the meaning of all unfamiliar words. Based on this, one could speculate that there appears to be a positive relationship between the amount of time students spend on language learning and their use of dictionary look-up and reviewing strategies. This speculation is to some extent consistent with Wijnen et al.'s (2017) observation of the causal relationship between time invested in study and the application of learning strategies.

Classroom students, as compared to distance learners, did also show a greater willingness to carry on reading English materials despite the difficulties that they encounter (Item 47). This appears to imply that classroom students are more likely to encourage themselves to overcome difficulties they may experience when reading English texts. A likely explanation for this may be related to the fact that, in classroom contexts, language teachers usually attempt to keep students motivated and encourage them to perform well. The presence of competition and peer pressure among students in classroom mode could serve as another explanation for their greater persistence in reading. It is also possible that students in distance mode have learned English for years and are more experienced in coping with reading obstacles and therefore need not to put much effort into reading practice (Xiao & Hurd, 2007).

In addition to being persistent in reading, classroom students also practiced writing notes, messages, letters, or reports in English (Item 17) more often than did their distance counterparts. This suggests that classroom students are more likely to use and possibly develop their writing skills more quickly. This may be related to the fact that classroom students, as full-time learners, receive much more direct instruction in writing and are required to do much writing in their studies compared to distance learners. This finding seems to confirm Murphy's (2005) observation that distance learners engage in little or no writing practice. Distance learners pay less attention to writing, perhaps because "learners feel that is 'easier' to do in isolation compared with developing oral communication skills" (Murphy, 2008; p. 214).

However, the strategies in which distance students scored significantly than classroom students primarily came from the metacognitive (Items 37, 42 and 43) and the compensation categories (Items 28 and 30), confirming the results for strategy categories in which they excelled. To elaborate on this, distance learners reported organizing their timetable in order to allocate some time for language learning (Item 37) significantly more often than classroom students. According to Cull (1993), learners opt for a distance mode of learning either because of work or family commitments. Keeping this in mind, one can infer that distance students made greater use of planning strategies in order to reconcile their work and family commitments with their university education.

Another strategy in which distance students scored significantly higher than classroom students is guessing intelligently (Item 27). That seems to be an indication of distance students' greater willingness to depend on their prior knowledge or context to infer the meaning of new words. One explanation for disparity in guessing strategy use could be related to students' prior learning experience. Distance students in this study were relatively older than their classroom counterparts and thus had longer learning experience that would enable them to make inferences. In his small scale study, Margolis (2001) did also conclude that the older the students were the more guessing strategies they tended to use.

The fact that distance students cannot readily approach a teacher when running into difficulties may explain why they tend to use the Internet as a recourse for learning (Item 42) more frequently compared to classroom students. In other words, the absence of a teacher to answer students' queries could be one of the reasons for distance students' reliance on other source for assistance. It is also possible that the course material for the students in self-instruction context was not at a level appropriate to their powers of understanding and therefore they had to browse the Internet in order to find some information that would help them understand. On the other hand, in conventional classroom context, language teachers are generally sensitive to the level of understanding of their students and make attempts to present material which is within students' grasp, and this could eliminate the possibility of relying on any other source but the teacher.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

The present investigate the extent to which learning context— specifically in-class versus distance learning— affects the use of language learning strategies among Sudanese EFL learners. The results revealed notable differences in strategy use between classroom and distance learners. Classroom learners tended to use more social and cognitive strategies, reflecting their access to direct instruction, peer interaction, and real-time feedback. Distance learners, on the other hand,

demonstrated higher use of metacognitive and compensation strategies, likely due to the autonomy and self-regulation required in less structured, technology-mediated environments.

These findings reinforce the growing body of literature suggesting that learning strategies are context-sensitive and not merely the product of individual learner traits (Anderson, 2002; White, 2003). The results also highlight the importance of considering instructional context when designing language learning interventions and support systems. As language educators and policymakers in Sudan continue to expand distance learning programs, it becomes increasingly crucial to equip learners with the metacognitive tools needed for independent learning. Without adequate strategy instruction, distance learners may struggle to monitor and direct their progress, especially in the absence of immediate teacher feedback or peer collaboration.

One of the most important pedagogical implications of this study is the need to incorporate explicit strategy training into EFL programs in both learning contexts. For classroom learners, integrating opportunities for collaboration and problem-solving can enhance cognitive engagement, while distance learners would benefit from modules focusing on self-management, time planning, and the effective use of digital resources. Teacher education programs should also address strategy instruction, ensuring that educators are prepared to guide learners in selecting and applying strategies appropriate to their learning environment.

Though this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the study relied solely on self-report questionnaires, which may not fully capture learners' actual strategy use. Although the SILL is widely validated, self-reported data are inherently subjective and may be influenced by social desirability or learners' limited awareness of their own strategic behavior. Second, the sample was limited to a specific group of Sudanese university students, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. A broader, more diverse sample including secondary school learners or adult education participants could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Finally, the study did not account for other mediating factors such as language proficiency, motivation, or digital literacy, all of which might interact with learning context and strategy use.

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research are proposed. First, qualitative or mixed-methods studies could offer richer insights into how and why learners select specific strategies in different contexts. Interviews, think-aloud protocols, and classroom observations could be used to validate or expand on the current findings. Second, future studies could examine the role of teacher input and instructional design in promoting strategy use,

particularly in distance education programs. Third, it would be worthwhile to investigate the impact of strategy training interventions across different contexts to assess their effectiveness in enhancing language performance and learner autonomy. Lastly, research on technology-mediated strategies, such as the use of mobile apps, online discussion forums, and automated feedback tools, could shed light on how learners adapt traditional strategies in digital environments.

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