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REVIWE ARTICLE

## **Review of Research on Arab EFL Learners' Motivational Language Learning Strategy-Use in the Tertiary Context**

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### **Abstract:**

Research suggests that successful language learning requires learners to utilize effective cognitive, behavioral and affective language learning strategies (LLS). Under the impetus of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) proficiency is an essential for adequately preparing the workforce of the future. This creates an imperative for LLs researchers to provide a contextualized and nuanced picture of the EFL learning experiences of tertiary-level Saudi EFL learners and their strategy-use. Thus, the aim of the present paper was to review LLs research within the Saudi and parallel Arab contexts to detect predominant themes, trends and gaps. To this end, 16 relevant studies undertaken between 2012-2023 were identified. The review found that the studies were largely focused on identifying perceptions and attitudes towards LLs amongst students and deployed mostly quantitative methodologies. They predominantly strove to confirm earlier studies rather than to pursue exploratory or intervention-based research trajectories that could provide deeper insights or deploy strategy-use research to address challenges faced by the learners. Based on the above, the present paper suggests an urgent need for Arab LLs researchers (particularly in the Saudi context) to undertake contextualized and actionable research of benefit to Arab (and Saudi) EFL practitioners and learners.

**Keywords:** Language learning strategies, EFL learning, Vision 2023, Social contexts

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### **1. Introduction and Literature Review**

Literature on the role of motivation enabling English as foreign language (EFL) learners to make gains in proficiency suggests that the skillful use of 'strategies can encourage learners to think more positively and thus be more motivated in their language learning process' (Alshenqeeti, 2018, p. 1). Viewed as a key process in second language acquisition (SLA) which account for the difference in linguistic gains (Krashen, 2013), LLS comprise 'actions that learners take to accomplish their learning goals' which include 'learning approaches that assist their learning [enabling them] to orchestrate the strategies that best meet task demands and their own learning preferences' (Chang & Liu, 2013, p.196).

Against this backdrop, the aim of the present paper is to review recent research on Arab EFL learners' strategy use within university contexts. Earlier systematic reviews of language learning strategies (LLS) (for example, Oxford, 2011; Rose et al, 2018) have not included a focus on LLS research in relation to Arab EFL learners (Hajar, 2019). To address this, Hajar (2019) carried out a critical review of 27 quantitative (22) and qualitative (5) studies within the Arab EFL context. Based on his evaluation of the studies Hajar (2019) called for a shift away from questionnaire-based studies depicting only the EFL learners' preferred strategies to research drawing upon interview data and open-ended questionnaires which could allow researchers to build up a clearer picture of how participants actually used their reported strategies as influenced by the hindering or facilitating realities of their context. Hajar (2019) also advocated the need to conduct research in such a way that the findings were made accessible to teachers and learners, thus enabling them the teachers to draw upon research to inform and improve their instruction and learners to use relevant LLS for their learning challenges. While the primary aim of the present review is to map existing LLS use research within the Arab EFL university contexts, at an ancillary level, it will attempt to take stock of the extent to which the reviewed studies align (or not) with the suggestions made in Hajar's (2019) critical review.

To ensure a systematic review of available literature, the following inclusion criteria were adopted. The reviewed studies had to:

1. Contain empirical research (published research papers & unpublished dissertations and theses).
2. Be carried out in Arab EFL university settings.
3. Demonstrate a focus on motivational strategy use by Arab EFL learners
4. Be published between 2012-2023.

To identify relevant research publications (published articles, conference papers, theses & dissertations), a number of reputed databases were examined, including Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), LISA (Library and Information Science Abstracts), Scopus and the MLA International Bibliography. Due to the observed dearth of recent research within the defined parameters, unpublished research was included in the present paper. Based on these criteria, research containing keywords such as "language learner strategies", "language learning strategies", "Arab EFL university learners" was searched within the databases noted above. Within these parameters, 16 relevant studies were identified for inclusion in the review see Table 1 below:

*Table 1 Details of Reviewed Studies*

<b>Geographical setting</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Publication Date</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Unpublished theses/ Published papers</b>
UAE	1	Mahmoud (2016)	Teachers & Learners (6)		Mahmoud (2016)
Saudi Arabia	9	Kassem & Alqahtani (2023)	Learners (9)	Quantitative (11)	Kassem & Alqahtani (2023)
		Almansour (2022)		Mixed Methods (2)	Almansour (2022)
		Altalhi (2020)		Qualitative (2)	Mahfouz (2021)

		Elashhab (2020) Shousha (2018) Alzubi & Singh (2017) Alhaysony (2017) Alhaisoni (2012) Alnufaie & Grenfell (2012)		Experimental (1)	Altalhi (2020) Elashhab (2020) Keblawi (2020) Hajar (2019) Alzubi & Singh (2017) Keblawi (2020) Shousha (2018) Alhaysony (2017)
Oman	1	Al-Mahrooqi, Hassan & Cofie (2012)	Teachers (1)		El Aouri & Zerhouni (2017)
Palestine	1	Mahfouz (2021)			Al-Mahrooqi, Hassan & Cofie (2012)
Morocco	1	El Aouri & Zerhouni (2017)			Alhaisoni (2012)
Arabs in Israel (Palestine)	1	Keblawi (2020)			Alnufaie & Grenfell (2012)
Algeria	1	Bouras (2019)			
Arabs in international context (Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia)	1	Hajar (2019)			

The discussion within the literature review is organized in two sections. Section 1.2 discusses research on motivational language learning strategies carried out with a singular focus on EFL learners, whereas Section 1.3 reviews studies involving teachers and learners. This review is framed by the following questions:

- i) What were the foci of the investigation in the reviewed studies?
- ii) What do the methodologies deployed across the reviewed studies suggest about trends in LLs research within the Arab EFL university context?
- iii) To what extent do the reviewed studies align with the directions outlined by Hajar (2019)?

Research on LLs by students to improve their EFL proficiency at the university level spans a range of geographical contexts. These include investigations into motivation, use of strategy and L2 reading comprehension in the Saudi EFL classroom (Kassem & Alqahtani, 2023), student perceptions of teacher-led motivational strategies in the Arab Israeli (Palestinian) context (Keblawi, 2020), strategy use by Palestinian teachers and student perceptions of these practices (Mahfouz, 2021), LLs used by Moroccan students (El Aouri & Zehrouni, 2017), correlational strategy use

research within the Saudi EFL context (Alhaisoni, 2012; Alhaysony, 2017), Saudi EFL writers' strategies (Alnufaie, 2012) and mobile mediated LLs in Saudi EFL reading context (Alzubi & Singh, 2017). A qualitative study entailed exploration of the role of 'significant others' in influencing the development of Arab EFL learners' LLs use (Hajar, 2019). A study which takes a different approach to investigating LLs use is an intervention-based study carried out with at-risk students at a UAE university documenting not only their strategy use but also changes in their academic attainment (Mahmoud, 2016).

Analyzing questionnaire (motivation and reading questionnaires) and test data from 308 male and female EFL learners at a Saudi university in order to map how motivation to read, use of strategies and comprehension of EFL texts, the study by Kassem and Alqahtani (2023) provides a number of insightful results. The study revealed not only that higher motivation to read was linked to stronger reading comprehension but also that the students' use of relevant LLs accounted for differences in their comprehension. The students' use of reading strategies was influenced by extrinsic motivation, with highly motivated students deploying pre, while and post reading strategies more frequently than less motivated peers. Kassem and Alqahtani (2023) also found that while-reading strategies were the strongest predictor of proficiency in comprehending EFL texts.

Other studies explored perceptions of strategy use. For instance, 400 Arab learners of English were asked to discuss the strategies used by their teachers to motivate them to learn in a questionnaire study by Keblawi (2020). The learners showed a preference for strategies which helped them to learn about communicative use of English rather than grammar or text focused ones. They also revealed an interest in EFL learning integrated with technology. Along similar lines, Mahfouz (2021) investigated EFL teachers' use of motivational strategies in the Palestinian university EFL classroom through interviews, while also surveying 71 EFL learners to provide insights into their perceptions of these strategies. Analysis of the data from the students showed correspondence between the teacher-reported strategy use and student preferences for LLs. Both teachers and students indicated the need for some of the existing methods of teaching to be updated and replaced with more motivational ones.

To explore correlations between strategy use and motivation, within the Moroccan EFL university setting, El Aouri and Zehrouni (2017) collect data from 228 students through Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning designed by Oxford (1989) and a motivation questionnaire based on Gardner (2004), Pintrich et al (1991) and Schmidt and Wattanabe (2001). Seeking to correlate strategy use by Saudi EFL learners (701 male and female students) in an intensive English programme by using the Oxford SILL inventory with the latter, Alhaisoni (2012) found that the females not only tended to use more strategies than their male peers but also made greater use of social strategies. Highly proficient learners reported using all six categories of the strategies within the SILL, whereas low proficiency learners made less use of all the categories. Alnufaie and Grenfell (2017) inquired into the writing strategies deployed by 121 second year EFL learners enrolled in a Saudi industrial college with the help of a questionnaire. Analysis of data showed that while the students reported the writing strategies supported by the instructional philosophies of the college instructors to be product-oriented, almost all the learners were combining both process and product strategies.

Alzubi and Singh (2017) administered an adapted SILL questionnaire to 32 Saudi EFL learners enrolled in the preparatory program at their university with the aim of examining whether there was any improvement in learner autonomy due to the explicit use of language learning strategies in reading EFL texts with the help of mobile assisted language learning. The analysis revealed only moderate use of LLs, thus suggesting the need to provide instruction in strategy use mediated by mobile devices within the EFL reading contexts.

Statistical analysis of questionnaire data revealed that the students were highly motivated and used LLs at a medium level. Inquiring into helping at-risk EFL learners at a university in the UAE, Mahmoud (2016) carried out an experimental study (based on instructional intervention) with 67 participants. The study assessed their use of language strategies through a researcher-developed and validated inventory and changes in academic attainment (CGPAs). The students who had received instruction in self-regulatory skills (metacognitive planning, monitoring and reflection) and a range of cognitive strategies outperformed control peers' strategy use as well as academic attainment. Investigating language learning strategies deployed by Saudi EFL university learners (134 students including 66 males and 68 females), Alhaysonay (2017) administered an adapted version of Oxford's (1990) SILL questionnaire to the students. The focus of the study was on understanding the correlations between gender, English study duration and LLs use by the learners. Alhaysonay (2017) found that while the use of LLs by the participants was on average from low to medium range, the learners tended to use some strategies (e.g., cognitive, metacognitive and compensation) more frequently, whereas there was less frequent use of strategies related to memory and emotions. While the study duration did not appear to account for significant differences, gender was an important factor, with female students demonstrating more extended use of LLs.

Departing from the intervention, attitudinal and perception-based studies discussed above, Hajar (2019) adopted a qualitative interview and narrative based approach to explore how six Arab EFL learners' social network comprising 'significant others' influenced their language proficiency as well as formation of identity through a range of strategies. The analysis of data from the learners belonging to Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria and UAE who were studying within an international context revealed the influence of parents on their strategy use, with differences in parental socio-economic status accounting for differences in support extended to them (e.g., access to private tutoring in English or language learning resources such as dictionaries and DVDs).

Within the Saudi EFL university context, a study by Shousha (2018) analyzed survey data on teacher and student perceptions of motivational strategies suggested by Dornyei & Csizer (1998) which enabled ranking of the respondents' preferred strategies. In addition to highlighting the need to take into account students' preferred LLs given the difference in student and teacher perceptions, the study also provided support for earlier research on culturally-specific LLs in the Saudi university setting. In a study on Saudi university EFL teachers' beliefs towards motivational strategies and how their use of the latter influences the attitudes of the learners, Altalhi (2020) collected questionnaire data from 18 teachers and 150 first year learners to assess how teacher strategies were applied in the classroom. The attitude of the learners towards EFL was measured with the help of an adapted questionnaire. Further, ten students representing low and high attainment levels were interviewed to ensure reliability of the results. Analysis of the data revealed

that the students felt positively about behavioral and cognitive aspects of language learning, although they showed little attention to emotional aspects. Another study within the Saudi university EFL context sought to inquire into the attitudes of teachers (through interviews) and learners (through surveys) in relation to motivational LLs in the EFL classroom (Elashhab, 2020). In this study, Elashhab (2020) found that the most frequently deployed strategies were linked to resources that satisfied the needs and interests of the learners, facilitated group work, fostered active engagement in the classroom and provided rewards and praise.

In a thesis study, Almansour (2022) compared the motivation of urban and rural university 233 EFL learners by administering questionnaires based on a version of Gardner's (2001) IAMTB (International Attitude/Motivation Test Battery adapted by Makrami (2010). Further insights into the questions framing the study were gathered through interview data from six teachers and focus group discussion with selected students. The study revealed that the urban students were more motivated than their rural peers due to the better jobs available to them. While revealing the learners' positive perception of support by teachers and peers, the study contributed to an expansion of Gardner's (2001) Motivation model by including parental support under the category of 'other support', thus making the model more culturally sensitive and relevant, particularly in the context of countries like Saudi Arabia where parents have an influential role to play in their children's academic outcomes. In the Algerian context, Bouras (2019) adopted a qualitative approach to studying the perceptions of teachers and students towards motivational strategies based on the work of Dörnyei & Csizér (1998). While both teachers (06) and students (06) who were interviewed recognized the motivating potential of the scales under examination, their responses revealed differences in perceptions of selected scales. For instance, while the learners considered the group work scale to be important, teachers felt that it had a less important role and required certain governing conditions in order to work. In regard to tasks, while the teachers considered clear explanations and instructions to be more important, the students felt that the content of the tasks mattered more. On the teacher behavior scale, the students accorded more importance to feeling relaxed in class (or the social aspect of language learning) in order to engage fully, the teachers laid more emphasis of academic attainment.

Only one study included in the review focused exclusively on the perceptions of the EFL teachers within the Arab context. In a survey study focused on identifying how 286 EFL teachers at Omani schools and universities nationwide ranked 48 motivational LLs, Al-Mahrooqi, Hassan and Cofie (2012) found that while teachers overwhelmingly supported the use of all the LLs, the most highly ranked LLs were related to teacher performance.

## **2. Discussion and Analysis**

The review of the studies related to Arab EFL learners' strategy use within a variety of geographical contexts in the region suggests that the studies tend to focus on perceptions of the LLs deployed (Keblawi, 2020; Mahfouz, 2021), comprise strategy and motivation questionnaire-based research seeking correlations between motivation and strategy use (El Aouri & Zehrouni, 2017) and strategy use and gender and duration of English study (Alhaysony, 2017) and gender and strategy use (Alhaisoni, 2012; Alhaysony, 2017) as well as to examine specific EFL skills (Kassem & Alqahtani, 2023). Other studies focusing on learners investigated Arab EFL students' use of writing strategies (Alnufaie & Grenfell, 2017) and learner autonomy and mobile-assisted language learning

strategies within the EFL reading context (Alzubi & Singh, 2017). To a notably limited extent, they seek to implement interventions based on motivational strategies for at-risk Arab EFL learners (Mahmoud, 2016) or to understand how EFL learners' linguistic attainment and strategy use can be influenced by 'significant others' in their social networks (Hajar, 2019). With the exception of the study by Hajar (2019) which drew upon analysis of in-depth qualitative data from narratives and interviews and the limited use of interviews in mixed methods research by Mahfouz (2021), the studies reviewed in this section also tend to make extended use of quantitative methods and analysis.

Studies which drew upon analysis of data from EFL teachers as well as students tend to focus on perceptions (Shousha, 2018) and teacher beliefs (in regard to motivational LLs and influence of their LLs use of learner attitude) (Altahi, 2020) and attitudes towards the use of motivational strategies. Only one study sought to contribute to the expansion of Gardner's (2001) Motivational Model by adding a dimension to make the model more culturally relevant in terms of LLs (Almansour, 2022). In terms of research on LLs focused exclusively on teacher perceptions only limited research has sought to capture EFL teachers' perceptions of LLs in relation to an inventory of 48 strategies (Al-Mahrooqi et al, 2012). While the majority of the studies in this section deployed inventories and questionnaires or mixed methods to assess perceptions and/or use of strategies as well as attitudes towards LLs, only one study adopted a qualitative approach to inquiring into teachers' and students' perceptions of motivational scales (Bouras, 2019).

Based on the above findings, it may be argued that LLs researchers within the Arab EFL context have tended to pay somewhat disproportionate attention to perceptions of and attitudes towards strategy use as well as self-reported strategy use. This may possibly be at the expense of intervention-based studies which have the potential to improve strategy use through training, studies designed to contribute to make conceptual or theoretical contributions or even exploratory, in-depth (qualitative) studies which point towards social, cultural and economic influences within the background of the learners that shape how they use strategies. Such surface insights, while relevant and useful to a limited extent, perform more of a confirmatory function.

With the exception of a limited number of studies deploying mixed methods (Al-Mahrooqi et al, 2012; Mahfouz, 2021) or qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis (Bouras, 2019; Hajar, 2019), the reviewed LLs studies indicated a predominant preference for inventory and questionnaire-based methodologies. While inventory and questionnaire-based research has its own utility within LLs research, more exploratory and qualitative research may help LLs researchers in the Arab EFL context to break new ground and generate rich local theoretical explanations of how and why Arab EFL learners (and even teachers) use motivational LLs, influences on their strategy use and conceptualizations of LLs. Indeed, even in wider LLs literature, there has been a growing call for more qualitative research on LLs (e.g., Rose, 2015), given the emphasis on the key role of context as well as individual differences in how language learners use strategies (Zhang, Thomas & Qin, 2019). Zhang, Thomas and Qin (2019) also suggest that research techniques that allow researchers to capture learners' real time strategy use (e.g., eye tracking) may help develop richer insights into LLs use. Methodological approaches which capture

Further, with the ‘social turn’ in education (Atkinson, 2011), it has increasingly come to be acknowledged that language learning transpires not just in the mind of the learners but also in society (Gao, 2010). Thus, the implications of this view for new approaches in LLs research cleave to the notion that ‘learners’ motivations, beliefs and strategy use in language [are] the outcome of a complex dynamic interaction between shifting contextual conditions and learners themselves, including their past English learning experiences’ (Wray & Hajar, 2019, p.11). Thus, researchers interested in undertaking LLs research within the Arab EFL context may consider adopting methodologies that provide a more participatory role to learners for mapping the phenomenon of their strategy use as situated in their social contexts.

Returning to the conclusions of the critical review of LLs research by Hajar (2019), the following question arises: Did the reviewed LLs studies within the Arab EFL context i) provide insights into how reported strategy use was influenced by hindering/facilitating realities of their contexts and ii) present actionable/accessible findings to the teachers and learners. As a number of studies predate Hajar’s (2019) critical review, the intent is not to hold up the studies to a rigid standard but just to gauge whether the points highlighted above are taken into account by Arab EFL LLs researchers in terms of their research design and audience. Since quantitative research designs tend to constrain participants from revealing insights beyond what they are asked, most of the studies (being quantitative in design) within the present paper provided largely attitudinal and perceptual data in relation to inventories and questionnaires. While there were two qualitative studies included in the review, only the study by Hajar (2019) probed the influence of context and background (social, economic status) within the perspective of social networks on students’ strategy-use. In relation to whether the findings were presented in actionable ways that could be accessed easily by students and teachers alike, while many of the studies indicated the pedagogical implications of their findings, these were not presented in a set of concrete and clear recommendations that could serve as a roadmap for practitioners or students.

### **3. Conclusion**

Given that only 17 relevant studies could be identified within the set parameters over the span of the last decade in the landscape of tertiary EFL education in the Arab context, it may be argued that there is an urgent need for researchers address this gap and work on innovative LLs research that breaks new ground and furnishes new insights of benefit to researchers, practitioners and learners, particularly in the regional context. On a somewhat positive note, of the studies included in the review, a majority of the investigations have been conducted in the Saudi EFL context, suggesting that there is definitely scope for more robust and wide-ranging research within Saudi Arabia if LLs researchers adopt a clearer roadmap for meaningful investigations that focus on the strategy-related issues and challenges faced by EFL learners and teachers within the country. Setting their own agenda within the field might be a promising way for them to make significant contributions to the realization of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 which views EFL proficiency as a cornerstone of its plans for the country social, economic and cultural development and renaissance (Al-Mwzaiji & Muhammad, 2023).



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