

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND STRATEGIES

Esma Maamouri Ghrib

Email: asma.ghrib@planet.tn

Abstract

This research is concerned with Tunisian secondary school students' perceptions of the difficulties they encounter in learning English as a foreign language, the reasons underlying these difficulties, and the strategies they use in accomplishing their linguistic tasks. It is based on two student questionnaires in which the following hypotheses are made:

- a) The learners' difficulties are linguistic.
- b) The reasons for difficulties in learning English vary with the learners' course level, sex/gender, socio-economic and cultural background.
- c) The learners' strategy use and frequency vary with gender:
 - i. Female students make use of social learning strategies more often than male students do.
 - ii. Female students use translation/ borrowing more often than male students do.

The results revealed that the targeted students had difficulties that were essentially due to their lack of knowledge of the English linguistic rules, and that they made use of various strategies; social and affective strategies mainly. They also indicated that strategy use and frequency varied with the learners' course level, gender, and socio-economic background. It was also found that 6th and 7th graders had almost the same classification for the various strategies, but that they did not have the same frequency use, and that the boys used social and affective strategies, and translation more than the girls. In addition, the results showed that the low socio-economic groups' use of strategies was the most frequent and the most varied.

Introduction

The study reported here is part of a larger research (Ghrib Maamouri 2002), which investigated EFL learning and teaching issues at the Tunisian elementary and secondary school levels. It only deals with the secondary school level, and more precisely with the 6th and 7th grades; these grades are interesting stages, they are the final years of the secondary school, or *lycée*; the 7th grade closes the secondary school cycle and prepares the students for university, or professional life⁽¹⁾.

The present study deals with the difficulties the targeted students said they faced when learning English as a foreign language, and the reasons for these difficulties as perceived by the learners themselves. It tries to find out whether the problems were due to such factors as the students' lack of knowledge of the language rules (e.g., lack of knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation rules), lack of motivation for the FL, or lack of training. It is also interested in whether the students' course level, sex/gender, and socio-economic background had any impact on the way they perceived and coped with their problems.

This research is also concerned with the students' use of strategies while achieving some of their linguistic tasks. When dealing with learner strategies,

researchers enumerated various categories; Tarone (1977 in Faerch et al 1992: 62-63), for example, subdivided communication strategies into:

- a) Paraphrase: approximation, word coinage and circumlocution;
- b) Borrowing: literal translation, language switch;
- c) Avoidance: topic avoidance, message abandonment;
- d) Appeal for assistance and mime.

O'Malley et al (1990: 119-120; 137-139; 198-199) spoke about:

- a) Metacognitive strategies, which may entail planning the organization of written/spoken discourse, previewing, preparation, monitoring, self-evaluation, etc.
- b) Cognitive strategies, which may involve repetition, resourcing, ordering, grouping or classification of words and concepts, substitution, inferencing, elaboration, deduction/induction, transfer, translation, etc.
- c) Social mediation/ social and affective strategies, which may imply eliciting from a teacher/peer additional explanation, cooperation, working with peers, self-talk, etc.

Researchers found that different learners approached different tasks with a different set of skills and preferred strategies (Rubin 1975, Stern 1975, Naiman et al. 1978 in Brown 1987: 92).

Politzer (1983 in Oxford et al. 1995: 3) discovered that “course level influenced strategy use” (...) and that “female students used social learning strategies more often than male students”; he linked this with women’s “stronger social orientation” (Politzer 1983 in Oxford 1989: 238). Oxford et al (1988 in Sunderland 1992: 87-88) found “significant sex differences... reflecting greater use of language strategies by females... In three... studies... frequency and variety of strategy use was significantly greater for women”.

Chamot et al. (1987 in Oxford 1989: 237) found that “cognitive strategy use decreased and (that) metacognitive strategy use rose as the foreign language course level increased, but (that) social-affective strategy use remained very low across all course levels”.

This research explores the strategies that were made use of by the targeted students, and tries to see whether there were any similarities/ differences in language learning strategy use and frequency among the various learners. It also aims to find out whether these strategies match those of ESL and /EFL learners in the literature.

The study is based on the following hypotheses:

- a) The learners’ difficulties are linguistic.
- b) The reasons for difficulties in learning English vary with the learners’ course level, sex/gender, socio- economic and cultural background.
- c) The learners’ strategy use and frequency vary with gender:
 - i. Female students make use of social learning strategies more often than male students do.
 - ii. Female students use translation/ borrowing more often than male students do.

Research Design and Methodology

Participants

In this research there were 130 secondary school/ *lycée* students; 91 female and 39 male students, who ranged in age from 16-21, and were all speakers of Arabic, French, and English⁽²⁾. The students had two levels: 82 students belonged to the 6th grade and 48 to the 7th grade, they came from three different secondary schools, or

lycées: one *lycée* is located in a small Cap Bon village, 60 kilometres away from Tunis; the other two are in Tunis.

The groups of students were not volunteers, they were selected according to the availability of the teachers and classes. The choice of the *lycées* was mainly based on socio-economic reasons. A broad classification of social classes was made for this research according to which the students were divided into three broad socio-economic groups: 58 students belonged to the 'high' socio-economic groups; 23 to the 'mid' and 49 to the 'low' socio-economic ones. The criteria that were followed were mainly the occupation and level of instruction of the students' parents; namely, the father, for example, those students whose fathers were businessmen, dentists, architects, lawyers, university teachers, etc., belonged to what was considered the 'high' socio-economic groups; those whose fathers were shopkeepers, policemen, secretaries, etc., belonged to the 'mid' socio-economic groups, and those whose fathers were workers, peasants, craftsmen, barbers, etc., belonged to the 'low' socio-economic groups.

Research Instruments

The research is based on two student questionnaires (See **Appendix B**) conducted by the field worker, myself. I helped the students with the questions whenever required. The questionnaires took place during regular English classes, and the respondents spent 50-60 minutes to fill them out. On the whole, they did not pose problems.

Student Questionnaire I (STQ I)

This questionnaire was used in another research work that included other levels apart from the 6th and 7th grades (Ghrib Maamouri 2002). This was the reason why it was in French (the students' L2). The questionnaire was constructed to inquire about the students' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, their linguistic habits and preferences, their motivation for and attitudes towards the learning of English and other foreign languages. It also requested self-ratings of the learners' abilities in English; each rating was on a 5-point scale where **1** represented 'bad'; **2** below average; **3** average; **4** fairly good and **5** 'good'. The students were asked about whether they had difficulties in English, and about the reasons underlying them; they were also asked about the strategies they used to solve some of their lexical and/semantic problems. The last questions were about testing, and about their attitude towards the English program, which they had to evaluate as well. The questionnaire comprised 22 yes-no, multiple choice and open questions, but only Questions 1-8; 16-18 and 22 were taken into consideration for this study.

Student Questionnaire II (STQ II)

This questionnaire was written in English; it requested self-ratings of the learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities in the English language; each rating was on a 4-point scale where **1** represented 'best', and **4** 'least good'. The students were also required to indicate the order of difficulty of the various skills they had to learn on a 4-point scale where **1** represented the 'easiest' and **4** the 'hardest' skill. Moreover, the students were asked about the difficulties they encountered when learning the various skills, and about the reasons underlying them; they also had to tell about the learning strategies they used to solve some of their linguistic problems; namely, lexical and semantic. The questionnaire comprised 9 questions.

Apart from these questionnaires, reference is sometimes made to **Teacher Questionnaire I**, one of the teacher questionnaires used in a former research

(Ghrib Maamouri 2002), and in which the teachers were asked about their perceptions of learner difficulties among other things.

Data Collection and Procedure

The students' responses from the questionnaires, which were collected by the experimenter, myself, were classified according to the course level (6th /7th year) sex/gender, and socio-economic category (High/Mid/low) of the respondents. Then they were grouped, classified and analysed in relation to the points under investigation. Some percentages and frequency counts were provided whenever needed, and whenever possible; sometimes the respondents supplied more than one answer, so the total count of the answers/scores, not the total number of students, was taken into consideration when calculating percentages.

The data are presented, and discussed in relation to the following major points:

- a. The students' self-evaluation
- b. The learners' difficulties in English and the reasons underlying them
- c. The learners' strategies

Results and Data Analysis

Students' Self-evaluation

When asked to evaluate their level of English on a 5-point scale (**STQ I, Q16**), most students chose level 3 and thus classified themselves as 'average'; whereas, most of the 6th graders considered themselves as 'fairly good' by choosing level 4, the 7th graders chose level 3. On the other hand, most of the girls chose level 3, and the boys level 4. The high and mid socio-economic groups chose level 4, while the low socio-economic ones level 3.

The students, who were also required to rate their proficiency level separately on the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (**STQ II, Q1**), rated themselves as most proficient in reading, and least proficient in listening; in fact, they placed reading first, speaking second, writing third, and listening fourth.

What should be noted is that the 6th and 7th graders had the same classification for the various skills.

The female students had reading precede speaking, writing and listening; whereas males made both reading and speaking precede writing and listening. According to this self-rating, both boys and girls considered reading as their best skill and listening as the least good.

The high and mid socio-economic groups had exactly the same ranking order, as they placed reading first, speaking second, writing third, and listening fourth. The low socio-economic groups, on the other hand, had the same ability order for reading and speaking as the other groups, but unlike them, they placed listening third and writing fourth.

The results thus revealed that the 6th graders, the boys, the high and mid socio-economic groups were more confident than the rest as they classified themselves as 'fairly good'. The 7th graders, who rated themselves as less proficient than the 6th graders, may have done this because of their greater maturity and objectivity, which supports Gardner's belief that "older students having more experience with learning the language, have (...) greater variation of success and failure and are more objective in their evaluations" (Gardner 1985 in Kraemer et al. 1989: 3).

As to the girls and the low socio-economic groups, their evaluation might have been due to their lack of self-assurance. As far as the girls' lack of confidence is concerned, the findings in the present research consolidate those of other researchers in the field (Bacon et al 1992).

Learners' Difficulties in English & the Reasons Underlying them

84.61% of the students (i.e., 110/130) said that they had problems in English (**STQ I, Q 17**); the 6th graders who rated themselves as more proficient than the 7th graders, as mentioned earlier, surprisingly complained a bit more than the 7th graders (86.58% & 81.25% respectively), and the girls slightly more than the boys (85.71% & 82.05%). The mid socio-economic groups, which seemed confident, complained more than the rest (Mid groups: 91.30%, Low: 87.75%, and High: 79.31%).

When asked to give an order of difficulty for the various skills (**STQ II, Q2**), learners, generally speaking, classified listening and writing among the hardest tasks/skills (See **Section 3.1**), and speaking and reading among the easiest. This matches their ability order in the various skills, and also conforms to what they told the field worker orally. This also matches the teachers' perceptions of the learners' difficulties.

Difficulties with the Listening skill

All the respondents, whatever their level, sex and socio-economic backgrounds, mentioned vocabulary, meaning and accent/pronunciation as the major obstacles they encountered with the listening skill (**STQ II, Q3**); they gave less importance to such items as topic, content, facts, ideas and grammar (See **Table 1, Appendix A**).

The 6th and 7th graders almost had the same ordering for the items that posed problems, the only difference was that the 6th graders placed grammar fourth in order, while the 7th graders put reference instead.

There was total agreement between female and male students whatever their socio-economic backgrounds as far as the nature and classification of the difficulties they encountered with the listening skill.

Moreover, the students associated the number of readings of the listening passages given to them in class (which was three readings in most cases) with the problems they faced with this task (**STQ II, Q 3a-3b**). In fact, 62.30% of the students (i.e.81/130) complained that this number was not sufficient; more 7th graders than 6th graders (66.66% & 59.75% respectively); more girls than boys (70.32% & 43.58%), and more low than mid and high socio-economic groups held the same claim (Low: 69.38%, Mid: 65.21% & High: 55.17%).⁽³⁾

What students said about their problems with vocabulary, meaning, and pronunciation partly confirms what the teachers reported, but they played down grammar and content, which were underlined by the teachers as trouble spots. Moreover, the teachers explained that the learners' problems resulted from the difficulty of the listening passages, which were not handed out to the students after being read out, and also because of technical problems; tape recorders being often out of order, or not always available.

Difficulties with the Writing Skill

Table 2 reveals that the students had major problems with grammar, vocabulary and meaning, which were classified first; they were followed by writing mechanics (i.e., spelling, punctuation and capitalisation), topic, content, facts, ideas, logical reasoning, argumentation, exemplification, overall structure, paragraphing, and reference, which were not given as much importance (**STQ II, Q8**).

There were some similarities and also differences in the 6th and 7th graders' ordering of the various items; they agreed on giving priority to grammar, vocabulary and meaning, but the 6th graders gave more importance to mechanics, argumentation and exemplification, and in

their turn, the 7th graders put more emphasis on topic/content/facts/ideas and logical reasoning.

Grammar, vocabulary, meaning and writing mechanics were the trickiest items for both female and male students; however, logical reasoning, which was played down by the boys, was considered as a major obstacle by the girls, who in their turn, showed that they had fewer problems with reference than the boys.

On the whole, there was not much discrepancy between the various socio-economic groups as far as the nature and classification of the major problems they faced when undertaking the writing task; what should be noted; however, was that argumentation and overall structure posed more problems to the high socio-economic groups than to the other two groups, for which logical reasoning was rather a trouble spot.

The results also revealed that 65.38% of the students (85/130) considered transfer, especially from French, as a great impediment in writing in English. They explained that their difficulties were due to the fact that they did not think directly in the FL, they said that they thought in French even more than in Arabic, then translated their thoughts into English; only 31.53% (41/130) claimed that their problems were due to the fact that they resorted to Arabic first, then translated their thoughts into English (**STQII, Q7**). Resorting to French (the L2) rather than Arabic (the L1) may seem odd, but this could result from the fact that for some students, relying on French, which is closer to English, could solve their problems in the target language more easily, and more efficiently.

More 6th graders than 7th graders (76.82% & 45.83% respectively) claimed that thinking in French was a great impediment in learning English. For the 7th graders it was rather Arabic that they resorted to first (Arabic transfer: 7th graders: 37.5%; 6th graders: 28.04%).

More girls than boys said that they resorted to French first (71.42% & 51.28% respectively); and more boys than girls said they expressed their thoughts in Arabic first, then translated them into English (35.89% & 29.67%).

What is also interesting to note is the fact that the mid socio-economic groups said they used French more in expressing their thoughts than the high and low ones (Mid : 82.60%; High: 62.06%; Low: 61.22%); whereas, it was Arabic for the low socio-economic groups (Low: 44.89%; Mid: 26.08% & High: 22.41%).

To sum up, 6th graders, girls and mid socio-economic groups claimed that they thought in French first, then in English, the rest said that they expressed their thoughts in Arabic first, then translated them into English.

Students and teachers agreed about the fact that writing was an arduous task not only because of transfer, but also because of the learners' lack of knowledge of the English grammatical rules.

Difficulties with the Speaking Skill

When asked about their difficulties in speaking English, the students said that most of their problems stemmed from their lack of knowledge of vocabulary and meaning (See **Table 3**); they also mentioned grammar as their second major obstacle, and considered pronunciation only as a third problem (**STQII, Q4**).

The 6th and 7th graders had almost the same classification for the various elements.

The boys made of pronunciation a second major obstacle; whereas, it was the fourth for the girls, who in their turn, placed their shyness as a fifth problem; whereas, it was the seventh for the boys, who also stressed that content was a problematic area.

As far as the various socio-economic groups are concerned, there were only slight differences in their ordering of the various items; grammar, for example, was classified as a

second major problem by both the mid and low groups, and fourth by the high ones; and shyness seemed to embarrass the high and mid groups a bit more than the low ones.

What is interesting to note is that pronunciation was considered as the second major impediment by the boys, and that shyness seemed to embarrass the girls and the high and mid socio-economic groups mainly. The students agreed with their teachers about the reasons for speaking difficulties; namely, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Difficulties with the Reading Skill

Table 4 shows that lack of knowledge of vocabulary and meaning was again the major problem for the learners. Other items such as grammar, topic, content, facts and ideas were not given as much importance. The groups, whatever their level, sex, socio-economic backgrounds, almost had the same classification (**STQ II, Q6**).

The results also revealed that lack of motivation had some impact on the reading process; e.g., as a matter of fact, 64.61% of the targeted students (84/130) mentioned that when they did not like the topic of the passage they had to read, they had problems in understanding it; a bit more 7th graders than 6th graders said they had this problem (66.66% & 63.41% respectively); slightly more girls than boys (65.93% of the girls & 61.53% of the boys) held this claim; mid and low socio-economic groups had this difficulty more than high socio-economic ones (Mid: 82.60%; Low: 65.30% & High: 56.89%) (**STQ II, Q5**).

This also consolidates what teachers said about the students' reading problems. The teachers reported that some learners were slow in reading and learning the new concepts and words and that they had difficulties with the themes and topics dealt with in the textbooks, which they did not consider interesting or challenging.

Reasons for Learners' Difficulties

Table 5, which sums up the students' difficulties with the various skills/tasks as revealed by the two student questionnaires, indicates that :

- The targeted students considered that their problems were linguistic for the most part (accounting for 54.18% of the total number of the reasons for difficulty supplied); they claimed that they had lexical, semantic, grammatical and phonetic problems; they also mentioned content as being a trouble spot. This consolidates what the interviewed teachers reported in another research (Ghrib Maamouri 2002); they contended that most of their students had difficulties with grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, themes and topics.
- The learners' difficulties were also cognitive/mental (representing 17.22% of the total count); most resulted from transfer. The students claimed that they were not able to think in English directly and that they relied on French (their L2) more than Arabic (their L1). This may have been due to the fact that French is a closer language (in terms of origin and/ chronology). Moreover, the students reported that they had difficulties with logical reasoning and argumentation.
- The students ranked transfer of training, which represented 13.42% of the count, as the third major reason for their learning difficulties; only 50.76% of the students (i. e, 66/130) claimed that they had enough training in the skills they were taught; they rather complained that they did not have enough training in the various tasks they had to achieve in order to be highly proficient in the FL. The interviewed teachers, in the research mentioned earlier, claimed that they prepared their students well, and that the latter were able to answer all the questions they might ask them.
- Students' difficulties were also psychological representing 08.41% of the count and resulting from their lack of motivation and shyness. A few teachers also complained about the students' lack of motivation.

- Lack of work and preparation for the English course were also reasons underlying some of the students' difficulties representing 02.80% of the count. Thus only a few students admitted that their lack of serious work for the course made it hard for them to learn the English language.
- The students' difficulties were sometimes technical and organisational (representing 02.40% of the count); learners said that they had problems with the use of mechanics (spelling, capitalisation and punctuation) and with overall structure and paragraphing (i.e., organisation of ideas and text).
- Lack of knowledge of English and/ American cultures representing 01.55% of the count was an impediment for very few learners.

What is interesting to note is that most of the factors underlying students' problems were internal learner factors (representing 86.57% (i.e., 1729/1997) of the total count) due to learning difficulties rather than external ones resulting from teaching and lack of training (13.42%; i.e., 268/1997).

Learners' Strategies

When answering **Questionnaire I, Q18**, the students, who were asked about the strategies they used to solve lexical and/ semantic problems, provided the following examples, which were categorised as follows (Ghrib Maamouri 2002):

- a. Social mediation / Social and affective strategies: 'I ask someone for help'
- b. Resourcing: 'I look up words in the textbook or in a dictionary'
- c. Paraphrase/ circumlocution: 'I use a synonym, or express the idea I have differently by changing the structure'
- d. Simplification: 'I simplify my sentence'
- e. Avoidance strategy/ message abandonment: 'I give up ' ; 'I leave a blank'
- f. Translation/ borrowing: 'I use an equivalent term in French'.

Table 6 reveals that social mediation was the most frequently used strategy (23.51% of the time); the learners, whatever their course level, gender, and socio-economic background, used social mediation a lot thus showing their heavy dependency on outside help. This goes against Chamot et al.'s (1987 in Oxford 1989: 237) results, which indicated that "social-affective strategy use remained very low across all course levels" (See the Introduction).

Then came resourcing; i.e., use of the dictionary (21.31% of the time), a traditional learning strategy also found by other researchers, McGroarty (1987 in Oxford et al.'s 1995: 3), for example, found it in Spanish students.

Then followed paraphrase/circumlocution (21.31% of the time), simplification (13.62%), avoidance strategy (11.42%) and finally translation/ borrowing (08.79%).

All the mentioned strategies were shared by all learners whatever their course level, gender, and socio-economic background; what varied was the learners' rank ordering and the frequency of use of each strategy.

6th and 7th graders had almost the same classification for the various strategies; what is noticeable is that the 6th graders used resourcing, avoidance strategy, translation/borrowing a bit more than the 7th graders, who in their turn, used social and affective strategies, paraphrase/ circumlocution, and simplification more.

Female and male students neither had the same ordering, nor the same frequency use of the various strategies they said they used; females used resourcing, paraphrase/ circumlocution and simplification more than males who, in their turn, used social and affective strategies, avoidance, and translation more than females, which refutes our hypotheses.

The fact that male more than female students used social affective strategies, goes against Politzer's (1983 in Oxford et al. 1995) and Oxford et al.'s (1988 in Sunderland 1992) findings, which revealed that these strategies were used by the girls more than the boys (See the Introduction). Politzer linked this with women's "stronger social orientation", and we could link our results with the fact that the girls may have been inhibited by their shyness and fear of speaking to the teacher, or in front of their classmates.

Bacon (1992 in Bacon et al 1992: 474) also found that 'men were more willing to admit to using translation strategies than were women'.

The socio-economic groups also varied in their ordering and frequency use of the strategies; the low socio-economic groups used social mediation, simplification, avoidance strategy and translation more than the other two groups; the high socio-economic groups used paraphrase/ circumlocution more than the two others. As for the mid groups, they used resourcing more than the rest. What should be noted is that the low socio-economic groups' use of strategies was the most frequent and the most varied.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research revealed the following findings.

Most students classified themselves as 'average'; the 6th graders, the boys, and the high and mid socio-economic groups proved to be more self-confident than the rest as they classified themselves as 'fairly good'. The 7th graders, who rated themselves as less proficient than the 6th graders, may have done this because of their greater maturity, and objectivity.

As far as gender is concerned, the findings consolidated those of other researchers in the field as they showed that the girls lacked self-assurance compared to the boys.

84.61% of the students said that they had problems in English; most students, who rated themselves as most proficient in reading and least proficient in listening, classified listening and writing as hard skills.

The results indicated that the reasons for the learners' difficulties varied, and were mainly linguistic; i.e., lexical, semantic, grammatical and phonetic. The respondents reported that they had problems mainly with vocabulary, meaning, grammar and pronunciation when learning the various skills. In addition, 65.38% of the students mentioned the fact that transfer, especially from French, was a great handicap; namely, for 6th graders, girls and mid socio-economic groups. Generally speaking, the problems were internal due to learner factors rather than external resulting from teaching/ training.

The study also showed that the students made use of various strategies, social and affective strategies mainly, and that strategy use and frequency varied with the learners' course level, gender, and socio-economic background. What is noticeable is that 6th and 7th graders had almost the same classification for the various strategies, but they did not have the same frequency use. The boys, on the other hand, used social and affective strategies, and translation more than the girls. In addition, the low socio-economic groups' use of strategies was the most frequent and the most varied.

This research has shown that more focus should be put on listening and writing since they proved to be the hardest skills. These skills should therefore be reinforced, and students should be given more opportunities to practice English; i.e., they should be given more opportunities to listen to, read, write, and speak the foreign language.

- To reinforce the listening skill, technical problems should be reduced as much as possible. For example, in order to cope with the lack of availability of tape recorders, teachers should read the texts aloud to their students as many times as needed. They could make them enjoy the listening task by making them listen to songs and enjoy singing them, or using them as vocabulary- building tasks. Students could be asked,

for instance, to pick up words from the songs, fill in blanks, arrange words, speak about the music, the singer, etc. This would enrich their vocabulary, and push them to use the FL.

- Teachers could also use games (e.g., guess-what games, mime), jokes, stories, etc. to make the language sessions more entertaining, and hence more motivating for the learners, who would profit from their learning.
- Teachers could make students read extra texts, such as newspaper/ magazine articles, poems, short stories, and make the learners sum them up, paraphrase them, and speak about them to their classmates. They could also encourage students to bring their own texts, and choose topics for their oral presentations, and essays. They could also help them find pen-friends, and push them to write them letters in the FL, or they could ask them to keep diaries.

To sum up, teachers should make language tasks more as ‘social activities’ and less as language exercises, a distinction established by Widdowson (Widdowson 1983: 44); they should try hard to enhance students’ curiosity about the FL culture, foster their interest, and develop their desire to learn the FL.

NOTES:

1. In the old educational system, before the application of the 1997 Educational Reform, English was introduced in the 4th grade of the secondary school level, which used to cover seven years of schooling (grades 1-7). In this research, the 6th and 7th grades correspond to the 3rd and 4th years of English__ they are the final years of the secondary school __the 7th grade, which is the *Baccalauréat* year, closes the secondary school cycle and prepares the students for university, or professional life.
2. In Tunisia, the Tunisian dialect (TA), which is a variety of Arabic, is not taught at school; Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the school language, called here in this research the first language (L1). French, which is introduced chronologically after MSA, has the status of a second language (L2); English is introduced after French, and is considered as a foreign language (FL), but it has a special status as its teaching in Tunisian schools and universities has been made compulsory. It is also referred to as L3 in this study.
3. For the listening task the students are required to listen to tape-recorded passages in English; they are usually given three readings for each passage and are asked to answer various questions __ comprehension and vocabulary questions mainly, about the given passage which they may never get the chance to read as the texts of the listening passages are rarely handed out to students.

References

- Bacon, M.C. Susan and M.D. Finnemann (1992). Sex differences in self-reported beliefs about foreign language learning and authentic oral and written input. *Language Learning* 42 (4): 471-495.
- Brown, H. Douglas (1987). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, 2nd ed. Prentice Hall Inc., N.J.
- Faerch, Claus and Gabriele Kasper (eds.) (1992). *Strategies in Interlanguage Communication*, Longman Group Limited. 5th impression.
- Gardner, R.C., and W.E Lambert (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers.
- Ghrib Maamouri, Esma (2002). Learners’ and teachers’ perceptions of learning and teaching issues. In the *Revue tunisienne des langues vivantes*, Faculté des Lettres de la Manouba, Université de la Manouba. (in press).

- Kraemer, Roberta and David Zizenwine (1989). Changes in attitude toward learning Hebrew in a South African setting. *Language Learning*, 39, 1: 1-13.
- O'Malley, J. Michael and Anna Uhl Chamot (1990). *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*, Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, L. Rebecca (1989). Use of language learning strategies: A synthesis of studies with implications for strategy training. *System*, 17, 2: 235-247.
- Oxford, L. Rebecca and Judith A. Burry –Stock (1995). Assessing the use of language learning worldwide with the ESL/EFL version of the strategy inventory for language learning (SILL). *System*, 23: 11-23.
- Sunderland, Jane (1992). Gender in the EFL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 46/1: 81-91. Oxford University Press.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1983). New starts and different kinds of failure. In *Learning to write: First language/second language*, Aviva Freedman, Ian Pringle, and Janice Yalden (Eds.): 34-47. New York: Longman, Inc.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Tunisian Ministry of Education for having given me access to the various schools; I also thank the Directors of the *Bureaux Régionaux* of the Cap Bon and the Tunis areas, the heads of the *lycées*, the administration staff, and the teachers who generously gave their time for my experiment. Last, but not least, my thanks are due to all the students who kindly responded to the questionnaires and made this research possible.

Esma MAAMOURI GHRIB: Maître Assistant d'anglais at the Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis, Université 7-novembre à Carthage. She teaches linguistics, and psycholinguistics. Her research is concerned with EFL writing, reading and literacy/ illiteracy issues.

APPENDIX A

**Table 1. The Targeted Students' Difficulties with the Listening Skill
(STQ II, Q3)**

Item	Score	Rank
Vocabulary & Meaning	98	1
Accent/Pronunciation	80	2
Topic/Content/Facts/Ideas	47	3
Grammar	28	4
Reference	13	5
Exemplification	4	6

**Table 2. Students' Difficulties with the Writing Skill
(STQ II, Q8)**

Item	Score	Rank
Grammar	79	1
Vocabulary & Meaning	79	1
Spelling, Punctuation & Capitalization	30	3
Topic/Content/Facts/Ideas	23	4
Logical Reasoning	21	5
Argumentation	21	5
Exemplification	19	7
Overall Structure & Paragraphing	18	8
Reference	17	9

**Table 3. Students' Difficulties with the Speaking Skill
(STQ II, Q4)**

Item	Score	Rank
Vocabulary & Meaning	81	1
Grammar	49	2
Pronunciation	43	3
Expressing thoughts directly	41	4
Being shy	22	5
Exemplification	17	6
Topic/Content/Facts/Ideas	16	7

Table 4. Students' Difficulties with the Reading Skill (STQ II, Q6)

Item	Score	Rank
Vocabulary & Meaning	110	1
Grammar	40	2
Topic/Content/Facts/Ideas	33	3
Logical reasoning	29	4
Argumentation	22	5
Reference	21	6
Exemplification	12	7

Table 5. Reasons for Learners' Difficulties with the Various Skills (A Summary Table: Data from STQI & STQII)

Item	Score	%	Rank Order
Linguistic Reasons : a. Lexical & Semantic b. Grammatical c. Phonetic d. Content Total :	482 305 144 151 <hr/> 1082	54.18	1
Cognitive/Mental Reasons : a. Transfer L1 transfer L2 Transfer Not able to think in the FL directly Total: 251 b. Logical Reasoning c. Argumentation Total: 344	78 132 41 <hr/> 251 50 43 <hr/> 344	12.56 17.22	2
Transfer of Training	268	13.42	3
Psychological Reasons a. Lack of Motivation b. Shyness Total : 168	110 58 <hr/> 168	08.41	4
Lack of work and preparation for the English course	56	02.80	5
Technical & Organisational	30		

Reasons	18		
a. Mechanics			
b. Overall Structure & Paragraphing	Total : 48	02.40	6
Lack of knowledge of English & / American cultures	31	01.55	7
Total of Opportunities	1997		

Table 6. Learners' Strategies (STQ I, Q18)

Strategy	Total Score	%	Rank Order
a. Social mediation/ social & affective strategies	107	23.51	1
b. Resourcing	97	21.31	2
c. Paraphrase/ circumlocution	97	21.31	2
d. Simplification	62	13.62	4
e. Avoidance strategy/ message abandonment	52	11.42	5
f. Translation/ borrowing	40	08.79	6
Opportunities	455		

- a. parce que j'ai de bonnes notes en classe
- b. parce que je trouve le programme intéressant
- c. parce que j'aime mon professeur d'anglais
- d. parce que l'anglais est facile
- e. parce que l'anglais est une belle langue
- f. parce que l'anglais est la langue de mes chansons préférées
- g. parce que je m'intéresse à la culture anglaise et américaine
- h. parce que l'anglais est la langue des sciences et de la technologie
- i. parce que l'anglais est une langue internationale
- j. parce que l'anglais est la langue que j'utilise pour parler aux touristes
- k. parce que c'est la langue qui va me permettre d'avoir un bon métier dans l'avenir
- l. parce que c'est la langue que je vais utiliser dans l'avenir : je compte vivre et travailler à l'étranger
- m. autre raison ?-----

15b. Si Non, pourquoi ? (Encerclez la lettre qui correspond à la bonne réponse pour chacune des possibilités, vous pouvez choisir plus d'une possibilités)

Je n'aime pas l'anglais :

- a. parce que ce n'est pas une belle langue
- b. parce que c'est une langue difficile (la grammaire, le vocabulaire, la prononciation... sont difficiles)
- c. parce que je n'ai pas de bonnes notes
- d. parce que le programme est long
- e. parce que je ne trouve pas les thèmes et sujets du livre de classe intéressants
- f. parce que je la méthode avec laquelle on nous l'enseigne est plutôt traditionnelle : par exemple, on ne nous montre pas de films en anglais, on ne nous fait pas écouter ou chanter des chansons en anglais...
- g. parce qu'on ne nous explique pas les mots en arabe ou en français
- h. parce que je ne m'entends pas avec les élèves de ma classe
- i. parce que le professeur ne m'interroge pas souvent et ne connaît même pas mon nom
- j. parce que je ne m'entends pas avec mon professeur d'anglais
- k. parce que je n'aime pas les gens qui parlent anglais
- l. parce que je n'aime pas la culture anglaise et américaine
- m.. parce que je ne comprends pas cette culture
- n. parce que c'est une langue que je n'ai pas choisie d'apprendre
- o. parce que je n'aime pas les langues de façon générale, je préfère les matières scientifiques
- p. autre raison ? -----

16. Quel est votre niveau en anglais ? (Encerclez le chiffre qui correspond à la bonne réponse pour chacune des possibilités)

Mauvais	Passable	Moyen	Assez bon	Bon
1	2	3	4	5

17. Avez-vous des problèmes en anglais ? Oui Non

17a. Si Oui, quel genre de problèmes ?

17b. Si vous avez des difficultés en anglais sont-elles dues (Encerclez la lettre qui correspond à la bonne réponse pour chacune des possibilités, vous pouvez choisir plus d'une possibilités) :

- a. à votre manque de compréhension des règles grammaticales
- b. à votre manque de connaissance du vocabulaire
- c. à votre mauvaise compréhension du contenu des textes anglais
- d. à votre manque de connaissance de la culture anglaise et /ou américaine
- e. à votre mauvaise prononciation
- f. au fait que vous pensez en arabe et pas en anglais directement
- g. au fait que vous pensez en français et pas en anglais
- h. au fait que vous êtes timide et que ça vous gêne de parler en anglais et de faire des fautes devant vos camarades et professeur
- i. à votre manque de travail en anglais
- j. à votre manque de motivation pour la matière
- k. autre raison ? -----

18. Si vous avez des difficultés à comprendre ou à trouver les mots en anglais, que faites-vous pour résoudre vos problèmes ? (Encerclez la lettre qui correspond à la bonne réponse pour chacune des possibilités, vous pouvez choisir plus d'une possibilités) :

- a. J'essaie de chercher le mot dans le livre de textes ou dans un dictionnaire
- b. Je demande l'aide du professeur
- c. Je demande l'aide d'un(e) camarade de classe
- d. Je remplace le mot par un synonyme
- e. Je simplifie ma phrase
- f. Je m'exprime autrement en changeant la structure de la phrase
- g. je laisse tomber l'idée complètement
- h. J'utilise un mot équivalent en français
- i. Je laisse un blanc dans la feuille
- j. Autre solution ?-----

19. Est-ce que vous prenez des cours particuliers en anglais ? Oui Non

20. Combien de tests et devoirs faites-vous par trimestre ?

Nombre de ----- tests de contrôle Nombre de ----- devoirs de synthèse

20a. Est-ce que ce nombre est suffisant ? Oui Non

20b. Est-ce que vous pensez que les tests et les devoirs que l'on vous donne testent bien vos capacités en anglais ? Oui Non

20c. Si Non, pourquoi ? -----

21. Que pensez-vous du programme d'anglais ? (Encerclez la lettre qui correspond à la bonne réponse pour chacune des possibilités, vous pouvez choisir plus d'une possibilités) :

- a. Facile b. difficile c. long d. intéressant e. pas intéressant
- f. autre?

22. Qu'est-ce qui vous paraît difficile ? (Encerclez la lettre qui correspond à la bonne réponse pour chacune des possibilités, vous pouvez choisir plus d'une possibilités) :

- a. Les textes b. les questions de compréhension c. les exercices de grammaire
- d. 'Multiple choice tests' e. 'Listening' f. 'Speaking' g. 'Reading' h. 'Writing'
- i. autre ?

Merci!

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE I

(English translation)

1. Age (No. of years): ----- 2. Sex : F M
3. Home Address : -----

4. Father's/ Guardian's occupation ?

5. Mother's / Guardian's occupation ?

6. Father's/ Guardian's level of instruction ? (please indicate his grade/level at the primary/ secondary school / university, and the diplomas he got (the 'Examen de Sixième', the 'Baccalauréat', the 'Licence/ Maîtrise', or other diploma) :-----

7. Mother's/ Guardian's level of instruction ? (please indicate her grade/level at the primary/ secondary school / university, and the diplomas she got (the 'Examen de Sixième', the 'Baccalauréat', the 'Licence/ Maîtrise', or other diploma) :-----

8. Which grade are you at ? (please circle the appropriate answer and mention the name of your lycée)

6th, 7th (Lycée name : -----)
9. Apart from Arabic, French and English, do you know another language ?(please circle the appropriate answer) Yes No
10. Would you have liked to learn another foreign language instead of English ? Yes No
- 10a. If 'yes', which one ? -----
11. Do you have the opportunity to speak English outside the classroom ? Yes No
- 11a. If 'Yes', with whom ? -----
12. Do you listen to the English programs on the B.B.C. or R.T.C.I. ? Yes No
- 12a. Do you listen to English records/ cassettes / C.D.'s ? Yes No
13. Do you watch English T.V. programs and films ? Yes No
14. Do you read books, reviews, newspapers, or magazines in English ? Yes No
- 14a. If 'yes', give some names/ Titles :
15. Do you like English ? Yes No
- 15a. If ' yes' , why ? (Please circle the appropriate answer ; you can choose more than one for each case)

I like English because :

- a. I have good marks
- b. The English program is interesting
- c. I like my English teacher
- d. English is easy

- e. English is a beautiful language
- f. English is the language of my favourite songs
- g . I'm interested in English/ American culture
- h. English is the language of science and technology
- i. English is an international language
- j. English is the language I use with tourists
- k. English will help me to get a good job
- l. I will need English to work and live abroad
- m. Other?-----

15b. If 'not', why not ? (Please circle the appropriate answer ; you can choose more than one for each case)

I don't like English because:

- a. English is not a beautiful language
- b English is difficult
- c. I don't have good marks
- d. 'The English program is long
- e The topics and themes dealt with in the textbook are not interesting
- f. The teaching method is traditional
- g .The teacher does not explain words in Arabic or French
- h. I don't get along with my classmates
- i. The teacher does not ask me questions in class and does not know my name
- j. I don't get along with my English teacher
- k. I don't like English –speaking people
- l. I don't appreciate English/American culture
- m. I don't understand English/ American culture
- n. I haven't chosen English ; it's a compulsory subject
- o. I don't like languages, I prefer scientific subjects
- p. Other ? -----

16.What is your level of English ? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Bad	Below Average	Average	Fair	Good
1	2	3	4	5

17. Do you have problems in English ? Yes No

17a. If 'yes', what kind of problems ?

17b.If you have difficulties in English, are they due to (Please circle the appropriate answer ; you can choose more than one for each case) :

- a Lack of comprehension of grammar rules
- b. Lack of knowledge of the vocabulary
- c. Lack of comprehension of the content of the texts dealt with in class
- d. Lack of knowledge of English/American culture
- e. Bad pronunciation
- f. Thinking in Arabic and not in English
- g. Thinking in French and not in English
- h. Being shy and scared of speaking in English in class and making mistakes

- i. Lack of work, or preparation for the English course
- j. Lack of motivation for the subject
- k. Other ? -----

18. If you have any difficulty in understanding or finding out words in English, what do you usually do to solve your lexical problems ? (Please circle the appropriate answer ; you can choose more than one for each case) :

- a. I look up words in the textbook or in a dictionary
- b. I ask someone for help (the teacher, a classmate, a relative...)
- c. I use a synonym, or express the idea I have differently by changing the structure
- d. I give up ; I leave a blank
- e. I simplify my sentence
- f. I use an equivalent term in French
- g. Other ?-----

19. Do you take private courses in English ? Yes No

20. How many tests do you have a term ?

Number of tests -----

20a. Is the number sufficient ? Yes No

20b. Do you think that the tests you are given reflect your competency in English ? Yes No

20c. If 'not' , why not ? -----

21. What do you think of the English program ? (Please circle the appropriate answer ; you can choose more than one for each case) :

- a. easy b. difficult c. long d. interesting e. not interesting f. other ?

22. Which item do you think is difficult ? (Please circle the appropriate answer ; you can choose

more than one for each case) :

- a. Texts b. Comprehension questions c. Grammar exercises d. Multiple choice tests
 e. the listening task f. Speaking g. Reading h. Writing i. Other ?

THANK YOU !

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE II

(Original Version in English)

1. **In English** , which skill are you better at :

Listening Speaking Reading Writing?

(Indicate the **order of ability** on a scale of 1 - 4 : (1) = best, (4) = least good)

2. Which skill do you consider the most difficult :

Listening Speaking Reading Writing?

(Indicate the **order of difficulty** on a scale of 1 - 4 : (1) = easiest), (4)= hardest)

3. What are your main difficulties in **listening**, if any :

Vocabulary, meaning, accent/ pronunciation, grammar, topic/ content/ facts/ ideas,
examples, reference,

Other (please specify)

(Circle the appropriate answer, you can choose more than one).

3a. How many readings are you given for each listening passage ? Number :

3b. Is the number of readings sufficient ? Yes No

4 . What are your main difficulties in **speaking**, if any :

Grammar, content/ topic, examples, pronunciation, expressing your thoughts

directly in English, being shy, vocabulary, meaning

Other.....?

(Circle the appropriate answer, you can choose more than one)

5. When you do not like the topic of the passage do you have problems in understanding what you read? Yes No

6. What are your main difficulties in **reading**, if any :

Content/ topic/ ideas, logical reasoning (organization of ideas and text), grammar,

argumentation , exemplification, reference, vocabulary, meaning

Other (please specify)..... ?

(Circle the appropriate answer, you can choose more than one)

7. Do you think that your difficulties in **writing** in English may be due to the fact that :

a. you use Arabic Yes No

b. you use French Yes No

to express ideas and then translate them into English ?

8. Do you think that your difficulties in **writing** in English result from your lack of

knowledge of :

Content/topic/ideas, logical reasoning (organization of ideas and text) ,

vocabulary and meaning, spelling, punctuation, capitalization

argumentation , exemplification, reference, overall structure (paragraphing) ,

grammar (tense, adverbs, adjectives , articles, prepositions, conjunctions...)

Other (please specify)..... ?

(Please circle the appropriate answer(s))

9. Do you think you have had enough training in the various skills? Yes No

Thank you for your co-operation !