



## An Investigation into Approaches to Learning Adopted by Undergraduate EFL Learners

Kadija Fathi

Kadija.f1984@yahoo.com

Faculty of Education, Sirte University, Libya

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### الكلمات المفتاحية:

وجهات النظر، أساليب التعلم، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية.

### الملخص

إن وجود اختلافات والتباس في طرق تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية يشكل تحديات حاسمة للتحقيق في الأساليب التي قد تثرى أو تعيق كيفية قيام متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بالتعلم. تناولت هذه الدراسة أساليب تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية التي يتبناها طلاب المرحلة الجامعية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تم فحص ما إذا كان هناك اختلاف بين أساليب التعلم التي يتبعها الطلاب في الأقسام المختلفة بكلية التربية- جامعة سرت. تم جمع البيانات كميًا من 70 طالب باستخدام استبيان عملية الدراسة الخاص بـ Biggs (SPQ) كأداة تشخيصية لتقييم أساليب الطلاب في التعلم. أشارت النتائج إلى أن معظم الطلاب اعتمدوا الطرق السطحية. و حصلت هذه الأساليب في التعلم على أعلى متوسط درجات (  $M = 4.55$  ) في حين كانت الأساليب العميقة منخفضة (  $M = 1.77$  ). وأوضحت النتائج أيضًا الاختلافات بين أساليب الطلاب في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في الأقسام المختلفة. توفر النتائج الرئيسية مدخلات للمؤسسات الأكاديمية حول عملية التعلم وتكون بمثابة مرجع لاتخاذ القرار وتحسين أساليب التعلم للطلاب. وقد تم تقديم اقتراحات للمعلمين وواضعي السياسات التعليمية والبحوث المستقبلية بالتفصيل في هذه الدراسة.

### Abstract

The existence of differences and confusion in the approaches to learning English crucially pose challenges to investigate the approaches that may either enrich or hinder how English language learners go about learning. This study investigated the approaches to learning English adopted by EFL undergraduate students. In addition, it examined if there is a difference between the approaches to learning adopted by students in different departments at the Faculty of Education, Sirte University in Libya. Data were collected quantitatively from 70 students using the Biggs' Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) as a diagnostic instrument for assessing students' perceived approaches to learning. The results indicated that most students adopted surface approaches. These approaches to learning gained the highest mean score ( $M=4.55$ ) whereas deep approaches were the low ( $M=1.77$ ). The results also explained differences among students' approaches to learning English in different departments. The key findings provide inputs to the academic institutions on the learning process and act as a reference for decision-making and improvement in the learning approaches of students. suggestions for teachers, educational policymakers and future research have been provided in detail in this study.

### Keywords

Perceptions, Approaches to Learning, English as a Foreign Language, EFL Learners.

### 1. Introduction

Enhancing foreign language learning and acquisition has always been of great significance to different institutions. Certainly, the growth in the spread of EFL learners around the world studying English is an essential subject in educational institutes (Ahmad, 2015; Kadija, 2022), and is in line with Arab countries, where English is widely considered a foreign language and solely a tutorial subject in the education system (Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, Al-Siyabi, & Al-Maamari, 2015; Abosnan, 2016, Kadija, 2019; Alqarni, 2023). Nevertheless, there is an accumulated appeal for

English graduate speakers through the growth in alternative sectors like business enterprises. Students' inability to achieve operational proficiency is a critical issue in Arab countries (Alshehri, 2014).

By studying how students better learn or perceive a particular task and then went about learning it. The concept that students' perceptions and learning-related activities are basic to 'Student Approaches to Learning' (SAL) theory (Marton & Säljö, 1976a, 1976b; Biggs, 1993a). Marton and Säljö (1976a) and Marton and Booth (1997) came up with this notion 'approach to learning'. It is seen by many educators as a powerful means of

modelling student learning and the efficiency of learning outcomes (Duff, Boyle, & Dunleavy, 2002). As an important process in language learning and various aspects including its categorization, strategies and motives, SAL has captured little attention from scholars throughout Libya.

Libya is rated with very low English proficiency, ranking 108 out of 111 countries and received score 390 due to their surface learning (English Proficiency Index Report (EPI), 2022). The way students learn a language is an independent process. Previous studies have been mainly centred on the stratum of general learning style and difficulties with less attention paid to SAL. The growing body of research on SAL has been mostly carried out in the English second language (ESL) context and has concluded its effectiveness (Entwist & Tait, 1990; Chin & Brown, 2000). The present study, thus, discusses the SAL that EFL learners should present in an EFL context, such as Libya. In the classroom, it is evident that SAL affects the learning situation (Alqarni, 2023). Therefore, the quality of learning would be improved once learners adopt the approaches that best support English Language learning and address their needs. Because most SAL are parallel to successful learners' educational outcomes, in higher education, it is questionable what approach EFL learners adopt. Hence, the status of an EFL teaching classroom represents a vital venue for the characterization and enhancement of the domains of SAL and their influence on students learning of English.

Effective learning, generally, requires reflexive thinking about learners' performance regarding how to gain knowledge and the impact of applied approaches on student learning (De Houwer, Barnes-Holmes & Moors, 2013; Hattie, 2013). Therefore, the current study explores the SAL based on students' perceptions that have an effect and assist in improving English learning quality. Accordingly, the present study was set in English Foreign Language (EFL) context targeting Libyan students to determine their approaches to learning. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the approaches to learning adopted by undergraduate students and examine if there is a difference between the approaches to learning adopted at the Faculty of Education in Sirte University.

## Research Questions

1. What are the approaches to learning adopted by the undergraduate students at the Faculty of Education?
2. Is there a difference between the approaches to learning adopted by the undergraduate students at the Faculty of Education?

## 2. Literature Review

While there are various definitions of learning as referred to by De Houwer, Barnes-Holmes and Moors (2013), Hattie (2013) defined it "as a process of developing sufficient surface knowledge to then move to deep or conceptual understanding" (p.26). This definition is basic to give further attention to the depiction of approaches to learning. All learning assumes some process of intention to respond and associate with the tasks in a given situation (Arends, 2014; Teoh, Abdullah, Roslan, & Daud, 2014). A universal manner of depicting whatever the students do lays absolutely in the notion of SAL (Biggs, 1982). The ways of student learning are divided into "surface", "deep", and "achieving" approaches; as clarified by Biggs (2001) (Goh, 2008; Waes, Vanthournout, Gijbels, Donche, & Van Petegem, 2010; Teoh & Yap, 2015; Goh, 2016). These studies have found that the deep approach involved intent to improve understanding with corresponding approaches to grasp meaningful learning experience. In contrast, the surface approach demonstrates intent to evade disappointment with related techniques that encourage the memorisation of information but lack meaning and organisation. Alternatively, the adoption of the achieving approach tends to obtain higher grades in their studies (Fung, 2010).

A study by Swee-Choo (2008) examined the connection between the scores on student-teacher's ways of dealing with learning, their academic performance, and teaching effectiveness. A noteworthy advantageous association was found between these factors and a deep approach to learning, representing better educational achievement and the feeling that teaching belongs to student-teachers who implemented a deep approach. In contrast, the findings by Hasnor, Ahmad and Nordin (2013) indicated no association between academic achievement and deep approaches to study. In general, a consensus was found among studies concerning the usage of surface approaches to learning resulting in a low

level of achievement (Swee-Choo, 2008; Hasnor et al., 2013; Qureshi & Ullah, 2014).

In addition to the consistent findings pertaining to the year of schooling (Kırkgöz, 2013; Sabourin, 2016), gender (Veloo, Krishnasamy, & Harun, 2015) and culture (Chue & Nie 2016), contradictory implementation of the approaches was revealed. However, these studies were conducted with higher education in the SEL context whereas this study is interested in EFL students. Kırkgöz (2013) found that the first-year learners implemented the surface approach, while, last year learners tended to use both approaches. Interview data identified the influence of the English medium of instruction, lecturers' expectations of the learners, lecturers' style of delivery, and, most importantly, that low students' proficiency in English was found to be a factor that influenced the students' adoption of learning approaches.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

The study applied quantitative research design. To acquire data, a questionnaire was used to obtain data from the undergraduate students in different departments of the Faculty of Education, Sirte University, because it is appropriate to know about people's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

#### 3.2 Data Collection and Participants

For data collection, probability sampling as a sampling technique has been applied where the researcher selects members of a population randomly. All the members have an equal opportunity to take part in the study with this selection parameter (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Moreover, it leads to reduce bias and higher-quality data collection as the sample appropriately represents the population. The researcher separates the population into smaller groups that have no commonality but represent the whole population using stratified random sampling. These groups can be organized while sampling, and then a sample is drawn from each group independently to examine the differences between subpopulations (Creswell, 2013).

The research's respondents were Libyan EFL students from different departments of the Faculty

of Education, Sirte University. 70 EFL undergraduate students have been drawn from the entire population consisting of 570 students to participate in this study as presented in (Table 1). In addition, they were male and female students joining different departments. The participants were informed about the investigation's goal and the privacy of their answers as well as their spontaneous participation. The researcher explained and translated the questionnaire items for the respondents.

Randomly, the desired sample size and samples from each stratum have been selected. The quantity of samples for each stratum (department) has been determined according to the proportion of the population that belongs to that stratum. This confirms that each stratum (department) is represented in a suitable way based on the formula as follows:

$$\text{Sample Size} = \frac{R}{N} \times 100 \quad \begin{array}{l} R = \text{total number of} \\ \text{students for each department} \\ N = \text{total of students} \end{array}$$

**Table 1:** The participated sample of the target population

N O	Department	The Total number of students in each department	The selected sample	Per cent
1	English	76	9	12.9
2	Biology	135	16	4.3
3	Computer	35	5	4.3
4	Psychology	102	13	5.7
5	Kindergarten	29	4	7.1
6	Social Service	30	4	18.6
7	Mathematics	27	3	5.7
8	Arabic	40	5	7.1
9	Chemistry	25	3	22.9
10	Physics	19	2	8.6
11	Educational Administration and Planning	52	6	2.9
	the total	570	70	100.0 %

Table 1 indicates the participated students from different departments in the Faculty of Education.

#### 3.3 Instrument

Data is collected via the Biggs' Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) as a diagnostic instrument for assessing students' expressed SAL. It is a self-

report questionnaire that utilizes a Likert-scale format to measure the different learning approaches which students endorse by identifying the motives and strategies that comprise these approaches. The questionnaire yields scores on (measuring Surface, Deep and Achieving Approaches respectively).

The researcher used five points Likert scale questionnaire (this item is *never* or *only rarely* true of me, this item is *sometimes* true of me, this item is true of me about *half the time*, this item is *frequently* true of me, this item is *always* or *almost always* true of me ). The instrument was adopted from a well-known questionnaire. “The Biggs' Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ), an instrument for the evaluation of student learning in higher education, was revised over three years with over 2500 tertiary students” (Zeegers, 2002, p.1).

This instrument was adopted including 70 undergraduate students across the Faculty of Education. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section contained

questions that aimed at collecting participants' background information like age, semester of study, department and gender. The second section included 19 items that fell under strategies of learning which indicate the sort of related learning approach.

### 3.4 Analysis Procedures

The data analysis was processed on SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) according to the features of the research design. Data analysis was employed to investigate SAL and if there is a difference among the learners in approaching their learning of English in different departments. Basic descriptive data analyses such as mean and standard deviation were applied to measure the tendency and variability in students' answers.

## 4. Results

Regarding the first research question: What are the approaches to learning adopted by the undergraduate students at the Faculty of Education? Descriptive statistics indicated the following results:

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics**

No	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I find that at times studying gives me a feeling of deep personal satisfaction.	3.7286	0.88336
2	I find that I have to do enough work on a topic so that I can form my own conclusions before I am satisfied.	3.7143	0.80114
3	My aim is to pass the course while doing as little work as possible.	4.5571	0.50031
4	I only study seriously what's given out in class or in the course outlines.	3.6000	0.82357
5	I feel that virtually any topic can be highly interesting once I get into it.	3.9286	0.46067
6	I find most new topics interesting and often spend extra time trying to obtain more information about them.	3.8143	0.49028
7	I do not find my course very interesting so I keep my work to the minimum.	1.7714	0.93517
8	I find that studying academic topics can at times be as exciting as a good novel or movie.	3.8143	0.54621
9	I test myself on important topics until I understand them completely.	3.9286	0.54697
10	I find I can get by in most assessments by memorizing key sections rather than trying to understand them.	3.4286	0.92582
11	I generally restrict my study to what is specifically set as I think it is unnecessary to do anything extra.	1.9286	0.83962
12	I work hard at my studies because I find the material interesting.	4.0714	0.80436
13	I spend a lot of my free time finding out more about interesting topics which have been discussed in different classes.	3.4000	0.54904
14	I find it is not helpful to study topics in depth. It confuses and wastes time, when all you need is a passing acquaintance with topics.	2.8429	0.58075
15	I believe that lecturers shouldn't expect students to spend significant amounts of time studying material everyone knows won't be examined.	3.7000	0.89037
16	I come to most classes with questions in mind that I want answering.	3.6714	0.92817
17	I make a point of looking at most of the suggested readings that go with the lectures.	3.1857	0.83913
18	I see no point in learning material which is not likely to be in the examination.	3.2000	0.75373
19	I find the best way to pass examinations is to try to remember answers to likely questions.	3.3000	.748910

Table (2) presents the differences in the means among the items for SAL based on students' perceptions. It clarifies that the third statement (My aim is to pass the course while doing as little work as possible.) has gained the highest score ( $M=4.5571$ ,  $SD=0.50031$ ) of perceived characteristics of surface SAL English followed by high value ( $M=4.0714$ ,  $SD=0.80436$ ) for the twelfth statement (I work hard at my studies because I find the material interesting.) of perceived characteristics of deep SAL English. In contrast, the seventh statement has gained the lowest value ( $M=1.7714$ ,  $SD=0.93517$ ) of perceived characteristics of surface approaches to learning English. This result explains that each department differs in regard to SAL perceived and adopted by learners.

The results indicate that most students depend on surface preservation for information and concentrate on the main heading for subjects. Notably, learners may not be aware of how to approach their learning deeper or distinguish this classification of approaches. They are confused between the different characteristics described in the questionnaire and their actual practices. Therefore, the students the most discriminatory for the learning approaches are a result of their interest in learning the content that they deal with. This demonstrates that students, who seek knowledge with curiosity and interest, can relate learned information to prior understanding and expertise. Regarding the second research question: Is there a difference between the approaches to learning adopted by undergraduate students at the Faculty of Education? The results summarised in Table (2), indicate clear differences in the way learners approach their learning of the English language. Such variations in SAL differ considerably from one department to another across all nineteenth characteristics where a frequency measure in differences of SAL shows different learning favours. Table (2) shows that the differences in the frequency measure between SAL are notably high in the relevant characteristics. Such difference reflects the significant effect of students' perceptions and interest in learning English.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate SAL used by EFL learners at the Faculty of Education in Sirte University to learn English. The results of data analysis demonstrated that the arithmetic mean values of the surface SAL and the study sample are high, respectively (4.8143). On

the other hand, low arithmetic mean value (3.3286) for the deep SAL and the study sample. This indicates that students at the Faculty of Education mostly adopted surface approach to learning English rather than a deep approach. Previous studies considered SAL as a significant determinant of learning quality (Swee-Choo, 2008; Qureshi & Ullah, 2014). Similarly, the results of Hansor et al. (2013) revealed an association between learning approaches and academic achievement. The findings of the present research also revealed that SAL as an independent factor could be predicted by different teaching behaviours when performed effectively or ineffectively and vice versa. Consistent findings by Kirkgoz (2013) discussed that various factors of teaching and low English proficiency had an impact on SAL.

This result is in line with Veloo's et al. study (2015), which found that University Utara Malaysia (UUM) undergraduate learners lack an inherent enthusiasm for the points discussed in their written exercises. The overall students writing performance score was 67.58%. Also, the surface approach was adopted by most learners. In contrast, Sabourin (2016) using an online survey found that fourth-year undergraduate students showed higher scores for a deep approach compared to first-year undergraduates in the Ontario context.

The study's findings indicated differences in adopted SAL concerning the department. One partial interpretation could be that divergent learners would use different approaches to learning according to their positive or negative perceptions (Biggs, 1987). These revelations are in line with the study of Ullah et al. (2014), who also found positive associations between approaches to learning and students' perceptions towards aspects of their learning environment. Similarly, Chue and Nie (2016) also found differences in the learning approaches used by international and native learners in a private institution in Singapore.

## 6. Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated SAL applied by undergraduate EFL learners and whether approaches to learning differ according to students from different departments. Based on the research findings, the highest majority of students adopt surface approaches to learning but the results also show that the following high percentage of students are using deep approaches to learning. This may

be due to students' lack of awareness of SAL. In addition, SAL is considered changeable according to different factors. Therefore, the findings are limited to the population under the study only. Future studies are needed to measure the association between learners' self-reported approaches and awareness of approaches to learning. The study opens up further suggestions for research, such as exploring the relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and SAL. They might also study the influence of SAL on the teacher's attitude and support. A further study could explore whether gender impacts students' perceptions of the usage of learning approaches.

Overall, this research sheds light on the most relevant factor that affects the process of learning which is SAL. This factor could contribute to not only the low academic achievement but also reflect the opinions of EFL students related to their motivation and engagement to learn. This study has contributed to the research field of national and international education in providing evidence on a role in raising the fundamental issues of individual differences in approaching their learning in varied settings. Therefore, policymakers and teachers should give attention to SAL and its changeable nature and classification. They also should create a strategy to guide students on how and when to utilize the proper approach.

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