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Research Article

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE UNIVERSITY IN IRAN

***Robabe Izakmehri and Zeinab Rahmati Pasand**
Department of English Language Teaching, College of Humanity,
Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran
**Author for Correspondence*

ABSTRACT
The present study was an attempt to investigate which English learning strategies are frequently used by EFL Iranian university students as well as to explore the differences in the use of English learning strategies by self-assessed language proficiency and gender based on learning strategy theory. To that end, the researchers selected 288 Iranian university students through administering a demographic questionnaire and Oxford's (1990) SILL. Tests were performed at the .05 level of significance to answer research questions. The results of quantitative and qualitative data analysis indicated that Iranian university students used a medium range of strategies. Compensation strategies were used most frequently whereas memory strategies were used least frequently among the participants. Language proficiency levels had significant effects on the overall strategy use, the six categories of strategy, and individual strategy use items. The present study also found that gender had no effect on their overall strategy usage. In sum, this research provides English teachers and curriculum planners with validated information on strategies currently used by EFL Iranian university learners. The findings allow English teachers and curriculum planners to understand which overall strategies are used by Iranian EFL learners.

Keywords: *Language Learning Strategy, Foreign Language Proficiency, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*

INTRODUCTION
Some language learners are more successful than others in second or foreign language learning because of their individual learning behaviors that differ from others'. These inconsistencies have created attractive topics for researchers to pursue in the areas of second and foreign language learning. Language learning strategies are specific behaviors students consciously use in order to improve their target language.
According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), learning strategy is generally defined as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help learners comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1). They also point to language learning strategies as the "mental process" which deals with language information as well as the "thoughts" which is involved in the cognitive activities. A large number of studies of language learning strategies have been done to identify common learning behaviors of good language learners in comparison to those of less successful learners. Rubin (1975) found that good language learners were determined by three variables: "aptitude, motivation, and opportunity" (p. 42). In another study, Reiss (1985) discovered that successful language learners could fully understand learning tasks given to them, constantly applying new knowledge into previous information and internalizing learned knowledge unconsciously.
Vann and Abraham (1990) by comparing successful learners of language with those who were unsuccessful show that successful learners indicate more tendency to employ more variety of strategies and spend more time on doing learning tasks. Successful learners preferred to use a greater variety of strategies more appropriate to the tasks. Chamot (2004) defines good language learner as, "Strategic learners have metacognitive knowledge about their own thinking and learning approaches, a good understanding of what a task entails, and the ability to orchestrate the strategies that best meet the task demands and their own learning strategies" (p. 14).
Dörnyei (2005) described these studies of influencing individual differences in language learning strategies as "the most fruitful research direction in the area of learning strategies" (p.171). Ellis (1994) focuses on

variables deemed as important determinants of learning strategies and put it as, "Individual learner differences together with various situational factors (the target language being studies, the nature of the instruction, and the specific tasks learners are asked to perform) determine the learner's choice of learning strategies" (p. 529).

According to Bremner (1999), this is the reciprocal relation between proficiency and strategy use. He stated, "The notion that strategy use and proficiency are both causes and outcomes of each other, locked in a mutual relationship, complicates the pictures" (p. 495).

The purpose of this study by focusing on three primary variables that have often been thought of as the main factors affecting the different use of strategy; language proficiency, gender, and culture is twofold: (1) to investigate which English learning strategies are frequently used by EFL Iranian university students. (2) to examine the different English learning strategies by self-assessed language proficiency and gender. The findings of this research indicate the comprehensive characteristics of Iranian EFL learners' strategies in the English language learning process, and how the variables of English proficiency and gender affect strategies used to learn the English language by Iranian EFL learners.

Theoretical Framework

The present study was based on learning strategies theories. Language learning strategy has been broadly defined by many researchers of second and foreign language learning. To encompass the definitions and taxonomies of language learning strategy, various technical terms have been introduced: mental process (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), behaviors or actions (Cohen & Weaver, 1998; Oxford, 1990), skills or operations or plans (Rubin, 1987), tactics (Seliger, 1983), techniques (Stern, 1975), thoughts or beliefs (Weinstein, Husman & Dierking, as cited in Dörnyei, 2005), etc. Language learning strategy has been identified as a mental process from the cognitive perspective by many researchers. However, it is difficult to define a learner's mental process with clarity because it involves abstract concepts of human mentality. In defining learning strategy, Cohen and Weaver (1998) stated that learning strategy should be distinguished from the non-strategic learning process.

There are some discussions about whether language learning strategies are behavioral, mental or both of them. Oxford (1989, cited in Ellis, 1994) defines the term as 'behaviors or actions', while Weinstein and Mayer (1986) refer to learning strategies as both behaviors and thoughts. Stern (1983, cited in Ellis, 1994) claims that 'strategy is best reserved for general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach employed by the language learner, leaving techniques as the term to refer to particular forms of observable learning behavior.'

Another idea related to this theory consists of Oxford and Ehrman's (1995) views; they consider cultural background as a key factor in the study of second or foreign learning strategy in that cultural factors can shape a learner's beliefs, perceptions, values, and motivations in language learning. Some of the studies have focused on the differences of language learning strategies and styles between Asian EFL learners and North American ESL learners based on the different cultural backgrounds (Grainger, 1997; Griffiths, 2003; Gu, 1996; LoCastro, 1994; Phillips, 1991).

Each of these discussions describes learning strategies from a unique perspective, although altogether they may have helped researchers get a general notion of what learners' strategies are in learning a language.

Research Hypotheses

This study asks the following research hypotheses:

H1: There are no significant differences in the frequency in which EFL Iranian university students use English learning strategies.

H2: There are no significant differences in the use of English learning strategies among high, intermediate, and beginning level EFL Iranian university students.

H3: There are no significant differences of English learning strategies use between EFL Iranian male and female university students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methods

Research Designs

As an experimental research, a 3 x 2 factorial design was applied to measure the collected data. In the current study, independent variables were proficiency level and gender whereas the dependent variables were the mean scores of the entire Strategy Inventory for Language Learning items and the mean scores of the following six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. This factorial design was used to examine the effects of these independent variables of gender and self-assessed English proficiency individually, and in interaction with each other on a dependent variable of language learning strategies.

Participants

This study was conducted at Islamic Azad University of Chaloos, in Iran during March to December of the 2014 academic year. Of the 300 students surveyed, 132 male, 156 female with the age range of 21-26 were selected due to being homogeneous as well as non-native speakers of English. The English test taken by all participants as part of the university entrance exam was used as one of the criteria of this program's acceptance.

Instrumentation

Lee and Oxford's (2008) Iranian version of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning are consisted in the present study. It was a paper-and-pencil inventory included fifty multiple choice items; the participants scored their own questionnaires; a five point Likert-scale was used to assess the students' performance.

The researcher designed the demographic questionnaire which consisted of close-ended question items, asking about each participant's age, gender, current English class, college major, the length of stay in an English speaking country, and the self-assessment of English proficiency. A self-reporting demographic questionnaire has benefits of providing information from a large population, comparing and interpreting the information objectively through statistical data analysis (Park, 1997) as well as being controversial in language learning strategy research (Cohen, 1998; Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Data Analysis

In the present study to find the answers of the mentioned research questions, the collected quantitative and then qualitative data were coded. The Oxford's (1990) SILL was analyzed with descriptive statistics to investigate the overall strategy use (table1), strategy use in six categories, and the most and least used strategy items (table 2). The reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficient with 50 items was .93, which was high and suggested that the scale scores were reasonably reliable for respondents in this study (table 3). The descriptive statistics for overall strategy use showed that the participants used a medium degree of strategy use (M = 2.95, SD = .51). These statistics also indicated a medium use of each of the six strategy categories. Ordering from the strategies most used to least was: compensation strategies (M = 3.13, SD = .63), metacognitive strategies (M = 3.00, SD = .65), social strategies (M = 2.99, SD = .72), cognitive strategies (M = 2.97, SD = .57), affective strategies (M = 2.79, SD = .65), and memory strategies (M = 2.70, SD = .65). Pearson's r correlation (table4) indicated significant correlations among six categories of strategy variables. The strongest relationship was between cognitive and metacognitive strategies (r = .66) and the weakest relationship was between compensation and affective strategies (r = .37). EFL Iranian university learners also reported that the most frequently used strategies based on the response on the SILL was 'I say or write new English words several times' (cognitive strategy; M = 3.70, SD = 1.07), while the least favorite strategy was 'I use flashcards to remember new English words' (memory strategy; M = 2.20, SD = 1.06).

The research also investigated the significant differences in the use of English learning strategies by self-assessed language proficiency in terms of those at high, intermediate, and beginning levels. The result of

one-way ANOVA showed that English learners' proficiency level had a significant effect on overall strategy use, F (2, 285) = 9.21, $p < .05$. A one-way ANOVA was also conducted to investigate the significant differences in the use of six categories by three self-assessed proficiency levels (high, intermediate, and beginning) and indicated that proficiency levels had significant effects on five categories of strategy use: F (2, 285) = 3.833, $p < .05$ in memory strategies; F (2, 285) = 11.11, $p < .05$ in cognitive strategies; F (2, 285) = 6.09, $p < .05$ in metacognitive strategies; F (2, 285) = 3.56, $p < .05$ in affective strategies; and F (2, 285) = 4.67, $p < .05$ in social strategies (table5).

T-tests were used to examine the differences in the use of English learning strategies between male and female students. There was no significant difference in the use of strategies between male and female t (286) = -.80, p = .43; male students (M = 2.93, SD = .51) and females (M = 2.97, SD = .51). Also, when examining the six categories of strategies, there were no significant differences between male and female students; memory strategies were summarized, t (286) = -.39, p = .70; cognitive strategies, t (286) = -.1.11, p =.27; compensation strategies, t (286) = .17, p = .87; metacognitive strategies, t (286) = -.47, p = .64; affective strategies, t (286)= -.42, p = .68; and social strategies, t (286) = -.42, p = .67 (table 6).

The results of MANOVA revealed the interaction effect of gender and proficiency on overall strategy use. The main interaction of proficiency and gender on overall strategy use was not significant, F (2, 288) = .32, p = .72, η^2 = .00. Also, MANOVA tests were conducted to investigate the effect of main interaction of self-assessed proficiency and gender on the six categories of strategy use. The main interactions of proficiency and gender on six categories of strategy use were not significant with a small effect size: memory strategies, F(2, 288) = .82, p = .44, η^2 = .01; cognitive strategies, F(2, 288) = .25, p = .78, η^2 = .00; comprehension strategies, F(2, 288) = .44, p = .65, η^2 = .00.; metacognitive strategies, F(2, 288) =.30, p = .74, η^2 = .00; affective strategies, F(2, 288) = .79, p = .46, η^2 = .01; and social strategies, F(2, 288) = .19, p = .82, η^2 = .00 (table7 and 8).

Table 1: Overall Strategy Use of English Language Learning

	N	M	SD
Overall Strategy Use	288	2.95	.51

Table 2: Six Categories of Strategy Use of English Language

Strategy Category	N	M	SD	Rank
Compensation Strategies	288	3.13	.63	1
Metacognitive Strategies	288	3.00	.65	2
Social Strategies	288	2.99	.72	3
Cognitive Strategies	288	2.97	.57	4
Affective Strategies	288	2.79	.65	5
Memory Strategies	288	2.70	.65	6

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Guttman Split-Half Coefficient
0.93	0.95

Table 4: Pearson's r Correlation of Six Categories of Learning Strategies

Strategy	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective
Memory	1				
Cognitive	.56(**)	1			
Compensation	.38(**)	.59(*)	1		
Metacognitive	.54(*)	.66(**)	.52(**)	1	
Affective	.41(**)	.49(**)	.37(**)	.59(**)	1
Social	.46(*)	.57(**)	.46(**)	.65(**)	.60(**)

Table 5: ANOVA Summary Table for Overall Strategy Use by Self-Assessed Proficiency

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	Sig.	*F*	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	4.46[a]	2	2.23	.00	9.21	.06
Intercept	879.62	1	879.62	.00	3.63	.93
Proficiency	4.46	2	2.23	.00	9.21	.06
Error	69.06	285	.24			
Total	2580.92	288				
Corrected Total	73.52	287				

Table 6: Independent Samples t-Tests of Six Categories of Language Learning Strategy by Gender

Strategy	Male (*n* =132) M	SD	Female (*n* =156) M	SD	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Memory	2.68	.64	2.71	.65	-.39	.70
Cognitive	2.93	.56	3.01	.58	-1.11	.27
Compensation	3.14	.60	3.12	.66	.17	.87
Metacognitive	2.98	.65	3.01	.66	-.47	.64
Affective	2.77	.68	2.80	.63	-.42	.68
Social	2.97	.69	3.00	.75	-.42	.67

Table 7: MANOVA Summary Results of Self-Assessed Proficiency and Gender Effects on Overall Language Learning Strategy Use

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	4.64[a]	5	.93	3.80	.00	.06
Intercept	763.92	1	763.92	3.13	.00	.92
Proficiency	4.42	2	2.21	9.04	.00	.06
Gender	.00	1	.00	.00	.95	.00
Proficiency * Gender	.16	2	.08	.32	.73	.00
Error	68.88	282	.24			
Total	2580.92	288				
Corrected Total	73.52	287				

R^2 = .063 (Adjusted R^2 = .047)

Table 8: MANOVA Summary Results of Self-Assessed Proficiency and Gender Effects on Six Categories of Language Learning Strategy Use

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	Memory	3.85[a]	5	.77	1.86	.10	.03
	Cognitive	6.99[b]	5	1.40	4.57	.00	.08
	Compensation	2.84[c]	5	.57	1.45	.21	.03
	Metacognitive	5.26[d]	5	1.05	2.54	.03	.04
	Affective	3.64[e]	5	.73	1.74	.13	.03
	Social	4.94[f]	5	.99	1.93	.09	.03
Intercept	Memory	638.71	1	638.71	1.55	.00	.85
	Cognitive	773.35	1	773.35	2.53	.00	.90
	Compensation	809.85	1	809.85	2.06	.00	.88
	Metacognitive	802.73	1	802.73	1.94	.00	.87
	Affective	692.97	1	692.97	1.65	.00	.85
	Social	778.59	1	778.59	1.52	.00	.84
Proficiency	Memory	2.59	2	1.29	3.13	.05	.02
	Cognitive	6.58	2	3.29	10.77	.00	.07
	Compensation	2.75	2	1.38	3.50	.03	.02
	Metacognitive	5.14	2	2.57	6.20	.00	.04
	Affective	3.30	2	1.65	3.94	.02	.03
	Social	4.37	2	2.18	4.26	.02	.03
Gender	Memory	.39	1	.39	.94	.33	.00
	Cognitive	.06	1	.06	.19	.66	.00
	Compensation	.24	1	.24	.61	.44	.00
	Metacognitive	.03	1	.03	.07	.79	.00
	Affective	.05	1	.05	.12	.73	.00
	Social	.11	1	.11	.21	.65	.00
Proficiency *Gender	Memory	.68	2	.34	.82	.44	.01
	Cognitive	.15	2	.08	.25	.78	.00
	Compensation	.34	2	.17	.44	.65	.00
	Metacognitive	.25	2	.13	.30	.74	.00
	Affective	.66	2	.33	.79	.46	.01
	Social	.20	2	.10	.19	.82	.00
Error	Memory	116.59	282	.41			
	Cognitive	86.18	282	.31			
	Compensation	110.71	282	.39			
	Metacognitive	116.88	282	.41			
	Affective	118.17	282	.42			
	Social	144.47	282	.51			

Discussion and Conclusion

As the English language becomes more popular in Iran, a great number of new pedagogical methods and theories have been introduced to the English curriculum. Despite the trial and error that may come with innovating teaching approaches, the teaching of the English language has still been based upon exams. Rather than improving communication skills, more focus has been placed on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. This demand is in keeping with globalization. Unfortunately, most Iranian EFL learners have lost the competitive edge with English fluency due to the way they were instructed in

English from the elementary levels to the university levels. Anxiety and frustration with inefficient English learning are prevalent among Iranian EFL learners. The English curriculum has been limited to keeping up with the learners' demands As Oxford (1990) pointed out, if they want to become successful learners with high fluency in English, Iranian learners cannot be "spoon-fed" all the time by teachers or the regular curriculum (p. 201). For this reason, compensation strategies seem to be preferred by all Iranian EFL learners despite their language proficiency.

The results of this study were consistent with results of the earlier research conducted among EFL Asian students (Bremner, 1999; Wharton, 2000) and EFL Iranian students (Oh, 1992; Ok, 2003; Park, 2005). In EFL Iranian learning situations, most of the previous research reported that Iranian students preferred to use a medium strategy use regardless of age or school levels. To understand the medium strategy use of Iranian EFL learners in the current research, the following reason may be considered.

In the current research, EFL Iranian university students favored using compensation strategies, followed by metacognitive, social, cognitive, affective, and memory strategies. These results showed that memory strategies, which have been often represented as Iranian EFL learners' typical strategies in English learning, may not be the most preferred ones any more. The research also found that high proficiency learners preferred to use more strategies and a greater variety of strategies than learners of medium or low proficiency.

The research revealed that there were no significant differences in the strategy uses between male and female learners. It can be concluded that gender differences do not have a significant effect on language learning strategies. The strategy uses between male and female learners in Iran at the university level were similar, and the variable of gender was not the crucial element in affecting language learning strategies.

Looking at the main interaction of self-assessed proficiency and gender, the main interaction of proficiency and gender variables did not affect language learning. Also, the main effect of proficiency and gender was not significant in the use of each of the six categories. The two variables of gender and self-assessed proficiency combined did not affect Iranian learners' strategy use. However, more studies need to be conducted in order to find the interaction of these two variables and their affect on the strategies used when learning the English language.

Implications

The results gained from the present research can provide English teachers and curriculum planners with validated information on strategies currently used by EFL Iranian university learners. The findings allow English teachers and curriculum planners to understand which overall strategies are used by Iranian EFL learners. It also allows English teachers and curriculum planners to reflect upon their current teaching approach. The instructors and planners should analyze the current curriculum and teaching practice to see its compatibility with strategies most preferred or utilized by learners. In addition, teachers' awareness of the needs of their Iranian EFL learners is enhanced. Teachers need to be aware of Iranian EFL learners' expectations of their English learning environments, aware of strategies that should best be incorporated to the English curriculum, and should differentiate the tasks performed by students and learning materials needed in order to best support achievement for all individual learners.

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