

Language Learning Strategy Preferences of Iranian EFL Students

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Abstract—The current study was carried out with the intention of investigating the most preferred strategy used by EFL students in Iran. The instrument utilized in this study was Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to assess the learners' strategy use frequency in language learning. The findings revealed that, in terms of overall strategy use, Iranian EFL learners are, in general, moderate strategy users. The results showed that Iranian EFL learners preferred to use metacognitive as the most frequently used language learning strategy and memory as the least frequently one.

Keywords-component: language learning strategies, Iranian EFL learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the field of education over the last few decades, a gradual but significant shift has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning. The reasonable goal for language teachers is to make their students become less dependent on teachers and reach a level of autonomy [28]. At the same time, a shift of attention has taken place in second language acquisition research from the products of language learning to the processes through which learning takes place [21]. As a result of this change in emphasis, language learning strategies (LLSs) have emerged not only as integral components of various theoretical models of language proficiency [7][2], but also as a means of achieving learners' autonomy in the process of language learning [21].

Extensive investigation has shown the importance of language learning strategies in making language learning more efficient and in producing a positive effect on learners' language use [19][22][5]. Nevertheless, research in this area has shown that not all learners use language learning strategies (LLSs) in the same fashion.

II. STUDIES ON LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Within the area of foreign language research, a number of studies indicate that learning strategies play a significant role in successful language learning. In the last two decades, numerous studies of learning strategies have been conducted mainly to find out what strategies learners use, as well as factors affecting these choices. One of the best known of these studies is that of Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, and Todesco

[17]. This was a double-barreled study of highly successful adult L2 learners and adolescent classroom learners of L2 French, using intensive face to face interviews with the former and classroom observation with the latter. The results showed that interviewing learners was more effective than observation as many of strategies learners use are mental and so not directly observable.

However, there have been a few later studies of good language learners. Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons [10] reported a comparative study of successful and unsuccessful learners of English in Chinese universities. The findings revealed that the unsuccessful students relied on rote-memorization, whereas the successful students relies on a systematic plan and supplemented rote-learning with strategies for reinforcing what they had learnt. Halbach [14] reached a similar conclusion after analyzing the use of language learning strategies of the students of English. She found that the weaker students demonstrated a lack of critical self-awareness, that is, they had little use of the monitoring and self-evaluation strategies.

More recently, Takeuchi [29] identified the characteristics of Japanese good language learners through their biographies. Finally, Griffiths [13] explored good language learners in relation to such individual difference factors as motivation, age, and personality.

Taken together, these investigations identified a good language learner as one who is a mentally active learner, monitors language comprehension and production, practices communication in the language, makes use of prior linguistic and general knowledge, uses various memorization techniques, and asks questions for clarification. However, little attention has been paid to students' learning goals. These goals can be expected to vary by general purpose in learning, such as the need for survival communication skills, a foreign language requirement in school, academic study in a second language at different educational levels, passing examinations, travelling to a country where the target language is spoken. Therefore, the context of learning together with language learners' goals determine the types of learning tasks engaged in and thus the types of learning strategies that can be expected to best assist learning [4].

Due to the fact that language learners use different types of strategies, they may consider priority over some strategies compared with others. Several studies indicated some of the learning strategy preferences reported by students in

different cultural contexts. In an ethnic study among Chinese learners, it was found that students reported a preference for social strategies as well as a disinclination to use affective strategies [30]. Another study looked at the language learning strategies preferences of students in a Spanish context. The findings revealed that they preferred affective and memory strategies more frequently than other strategies [19].

However, existing research on LLSs has heavily relied on learners' strategy use in language learning contexts. Politzer and McGroaty [26] found Hispanic students were found to use the various strategy categories more frequently than their Asian counterparts. However, the Asians made more progress than did the Hispanics. They speculated that what constitute good strategies might indeed be ethnocentric and context-based.

Bedell and Oxford [3], while doing a study with Chinese students in China, Taiwan, and the US, revealed that compensation strategies were the highest ranking category. In contrast, the Puerto Rican and Egyptian students reported only a moderate use of compensation strategies. Based on the findings, while they argued the higher use of compensation strategies might be typical of Asian students, memory strategies were ranked low in their study. With the same token, Mochizuki [16] also confirmed the same results with Japanese EFL students. Furthermore, Griffiths [12] reported that European students used SILL strategies more frequently than did students from other backgrounds. These studies indicated that nationality and context of language learning are major factors influencing the use of language learning strategies.

Furthermore, Cohen [5], Chamot [4], and Zhang [33] maintained that the context of learning situation may have influence on learners' choice of learning strategies. The findings reported in different EFL contexts [18][24] in Korea; [31] in Singapore; [28][27][1] in Iran) revealed that EFL learners are strategy users; however, it has not been clearly stated that learners are using exactly which certain types of learning strategies and how [6]. The current study has attempted to investigate which language learning strategies, and to what extent, Iranian EFL learners use.

III. THE STUDY

A. Participants

The participants attending this study were 137 EFL learners randomly selected from four universities in Iran. They were male and female learners majoring in TEFL at the MA level.

B. Instrumentation Recruitment

Learning strategies are identified through different self-report procedures. Although self-report is always subject to error, no better way has yet been devised for identifying learners' mental processes and techniques for completing a learning task. The most common method for identifying students' learning strategies is through questionnaires [8]. The instrument used in this study was Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL questionnaire ESL/EFL version 7.0) [22].

C. Data Collection Procedure

The SILL questionnaire was administered to 137 EFL students at different universities. The purpose of the survey was to discover the type of strategy the students used. The participants were asked to mark the answers to the questions. They answered each item using a 3-point Likert-scale that ranged from 1 (never true of me) through 5 (always or almost true of me). The questionnaire administration took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Having collected the completed questionnaires, the researchers analyzed the results.

IV. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics was employed to investigate the overall language learning strategies that Iranian EFL students utilized, their use of strategy categories and their use of individual strategies. According to Oxford [22] classification, learners with a mean of 2.5 and under are low strategy users, learners with a mean of 2.5-3.5 are moderate strategy users and the mean for high users is more than 3.5.

As it is shown in Fig.1, the participants apply all the memory strategies at different level of frequencies to remember more effectively.

Regarding the use of cognitive strategies, the participants have shown that they are using cognitive strategies moderately while they learn English. Since the average of cognitive strategies use, according to Fig. 2, is almost 2.5, it shows that they are moderate strategy users in cognitive learning strategies.

According to Fig. 3, the way EFL learners used compensation strategies can be screened through detailed illustration.

The answers of the participants for the items dealing with metacognitive strategies show that they apply all the strategies to organize and evaluate their learning frequently. As depicted from Fig. 4, strategies in items 31 and 34 are the most frequently applied ones in this section. *I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me to do better* and *I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English*. Strategy in item 35 is the least frequently used one, that is, *I look for people I can talk to in English*.

Concerning the items measuring the affective strategies, the results suggest that the strategies in items 42 and 44, *I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English* and *I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English*, are the most frequently preferred strategies to manage emotions. The other strategies in this group are applied less often.

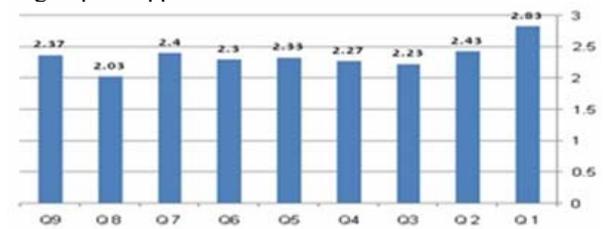


Figure 1. Graphic Representation of Memory Strategies

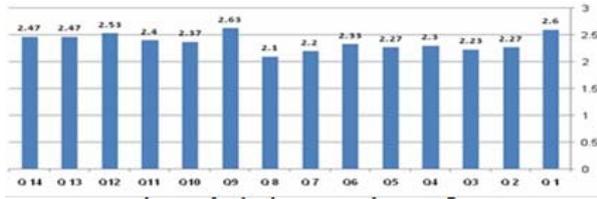


Figure 2. Graphic Representation of Cognitive Strategies

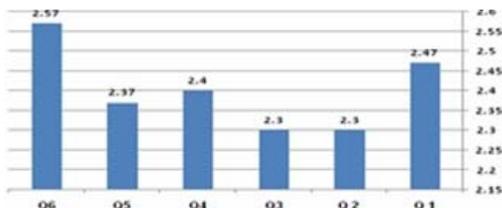


Figure 3. Graphic Representation of Compensation Strategies

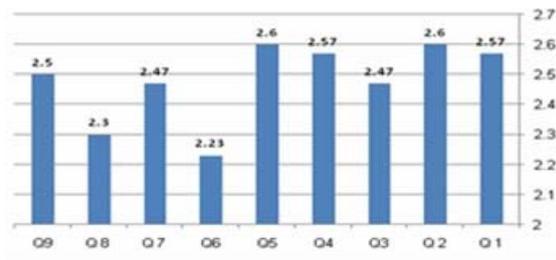


Figure 4. Graphic Representation of Metacognitive Strategies

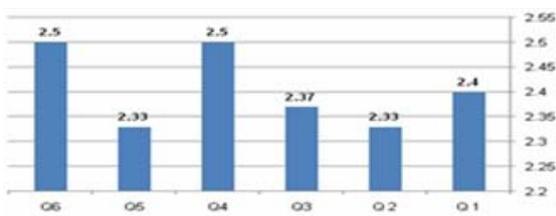


Figure 5. Graphic Representation of Affective Strategies

As far as the use of social strategies is concerned, the questions are designed to measure the ability of using strategies to learn with others. The analysis of the data reveals that the participants' mostly preferred strategy is item 45, *If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other persons to slow down or say it again*. In this section, the answers of the participants' show that the least preferred strategy is item 48, *I practice English with other students*.

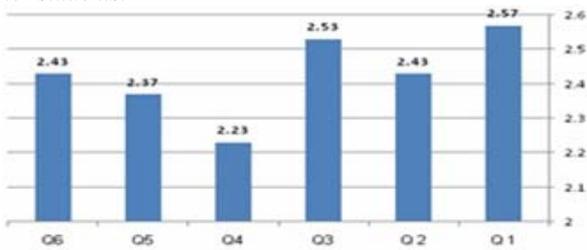


Figure 6. Graphic Presentation of Social Strategies

For the ease of interpretation, the six categories of language learning strategies are listed as follows:

- A: Memory Strategies
- B: Cognitive Strategies
- C: Compensation Strategies
- D: Metacognitive Strategies
- E: Affective Strategies
- F: Social Strategies

As Table 1 shows, the strategies used in part D are the most preferred ones among the students. Also, the strategies used in parts C and E are the same. The least preferred strategies are memory strategies (A). In addition, in order to represent the mean ranking of the strategies used by students, the Friedman test has been utilized.

TABLE I. INFERRENTIAL STATISTICS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES PREFERENCES

Mean rank, freedman test	strategies	number
2.47	D	1
2.42	F	2
2.4	C	3
2.4	E	4
2.36	B	5
2.35	A	6

From the data it can be concluded that the participants of the study used strategies for organizing and evaluating more frequently (part D) than other strategies. In other words, the EFL students use the metacognitive strategy as the most preferred one. And, they use the memory strategy as the least preferred one. From Fig. 7 below, it is shown that the strategies C and E have the same mean. According to the data, students have appropriate performance regarding the strategy use because the means of all categories exceed two in the scale.

Therefore, the findings revealed that in terms of overall strategy use, Iranian EFL learners are, in general, moderate strategy users, a finding in line with the results of studies conducted in other EFL contexts in general [18][25][31] and Iran as an EFL context in particular [27].

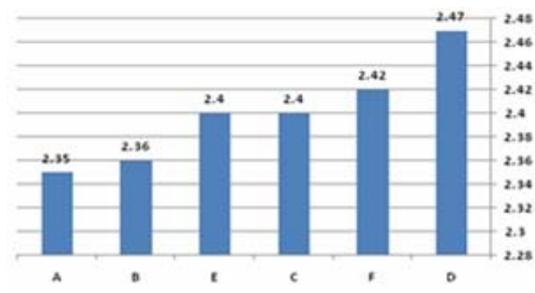


Figure 7. Graphic Representation for Language Learning Strategy Preferences

V. DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, Iranian EFL students reported using metacognitive, affective, compensation, cognitive, social, and memory strategies respectively, that is, the results showed that Iranian EFL learners preferred to use metacognitive as the most frequently used language learning strategy and memory as the least frequently one.

The results of other studies indicated that metacognitive strategies, along with compensation strategies were the most frequently used ones, and memory strategies as the least frequently used by adults EFL learners, including English major and non-English university students [31]. Other studies showed that the environmental differences could play an important role when learning another language. Similarly, the relatively scarce opportunity for input and output studies of EFL students resulted in students' report of a pattern of strategy use characterized by special emphasis on metacognitive strategies as well as cognitive strategies such as reading aloud [29].

Still, some studies indicated that the context of language learning is a major factor influencing the choice of language learning strategies. The literature review has shown that individual group and situational variables have an influence on learners' use of strategies. The effect of learner variables is a complex issue since the variables in many ways intertwined. If, for instance, a young woman is a successful language learner, it might be related to her age, or to some other factors, such as motivation, personality, or nationality. The review has also indicated that the value of strategy research takes into account learner within specific learning situations.

However, existing research on LLSs has heavily relied on learners' strategy use in second language contexts. In English as a foreign language (EFL) context, on the other hand, research on LLSs has mostly been conducted in South East Asia where the context of language learning is quite different from that of some other Asian countries such as the context of this study, Iran. For the past two decades, due to a variety of social and political reasons, Iranian EFL learners have had little or no contact with native speakers of English. In fact, one can rarely find foreign English-speaking nationals teaching English as a second language (ESL) in Iranian schools or universities, public or private. The use of Internet and other media, such as satellite TV, is neither widespread nor easily accessible to all language learners. Moreover, language teaching during high school years is mostly grammar-based with no attention paid to language use [27].

Moreover, the political atmosphere in Iran has witnessed fluctuations in language teaching. Despite banning English and attempting to replace it with Arabic, many economic, industrial, educational, and military activities in the country required knowledge of English. Therefore, the concept of learning English as a threat to national and cultural identity has changed. However, despite continuous efforts, there have not been considerable improvements in teaching English language ability of the students, and traditional methods and materials are still alive [9].

Learning strategies have proved a gold mine to which many researchers have rushed and, indeed, continue to do so [6]. Learning strategies are procedures that facilitate a learning task. Strategies are most often conscious and goal-oriented, especially at the outset of tackling with an unfamiliar language task [4]. When a learning strategy becomes familiar through repeated use, it may be used with some automaticity, but most learners will be able to call the strategy to conscious awareness. Two reasons in literature show the significance of learning strategies in the field of teaching and learning. First, by examining the strategies utilized by second language learners during the language learning process, we gain insights into the metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective processes involved in language learning. The second reason is that less successful language learners can be taught new strategies, thus helping them become better language learners [11].

The preponderance of research on language learning strategies has been descriptive, as researchers have sought to discover what learning strategies are reported by learners of different languages. The issues that arise from this body of research are: identification procedures of learning strategies, terminology and classification of strategies, the effects of learner characteristics on strategy use, and the effects of culture and context on strategy use. While less extensive, strategy intervention research has also suggested important issues related to instruction such as: explicit and integrated strategy instruction, language of instruction, transfer of strategies to new tasks, and models for language learning strategy instruction.

It is important that learning strategies research continue, both in these and other directions, for only through a better understanding of the learning and teaching process, more language learners can achieve the level of success. Therefore, strategy instruction can contribute to development of learner mastery and autonomy and increased teacher expertise, but additional research is needed.

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