

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS: ARE GENDER AND EDUCATIONAL LEVEL IMPORTANT

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates language learning strategies used by Iranian students. It also strives to find if there are any differences between male and female students and undergraduate and BA ones in terms of strategy use. The sample consists of 376 university students. Oxford (1990) SILL inventory was used to determine strategy use of students. The findings revealed that students mostly use meta-cognitive strategies compared with other strategies. On the other hand, affective strategies were the least used ones. Furthermore, males used more strategies in comparison with females. It also revealed that there is a significant difference between strategy use of undergraduate and BA students. The findings have implications for students, teachers, and curriculum developers who are to develop a curriculum compatible with the needs of language learners.

Keywords: Learning strategies; gender; educational level; Iranian students

INTRODUCTION

In view of the fact that learner-centered instruction is the standpoint in education in new trends, learners are expected to be more active in the process of teaching/learning. As such, teachers must be aware of students' characteristics in order to tailor their teaching to needs of learners. One of the areas which is closely related to characteristics and performance of language learners is the use of language learning strategies. Research in the realm of learning strategies have shown that successful language performance is dependent on effective use of language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Park (2005, p.24) states different types of strategies. The first category is related to direct strategies. Direct strategies are those that directly engage the L2. All direct strategies entail mental processing of the language. These strategies are classified into three main categories: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Memory strategies are applied for storing information, cognitive strategies are the mental strategies students use to make sense of their learning, and compensation strategies assist learners to overcome knowledge shortcomings to go on the communication.

Indirect strategies, the second category, offer indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, looking for chances, controlling anxiety, growing cooperation and empathy and other means. There are three groups of indirect strategies: metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies help learners to control their learning. Affective strategies are related to learner's emotional needs such as confidence, while social strategies lead to optimal interaction with the target language. Language learning strategies have shown to be very fundamental in directing learners' education and also their motivation to learn. Due to the importance of learning strategies a growing number of studies have looked at these strategies and their effect on academic learning.

While researchers in a number of countries have studied a lot on the individual differences of learners such as language learning strategies, little attention has been paid to this area in Iran to date. Present paper aims to identify the English language learning strategies used by Iranian EFL learners. It also strives to find if there are any differences between male and female students and undergraduate and

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BA ones in terms of strategy use.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The studies concerning language learning strategies are quite recent. The studies have probed learners' strategy use from different directions. In their well-organized study, Rahimi *et al.*, (2008) studied the language strategy use of 196 EFL learners at the post-secondary level to see what features influenced students' use of strategies. The results of strategy inventory and attitude questionnaires revealed that motivation was the main predictor of students' use of strategies; however, gender was found to have no role in shaping strategies used by students.

In another study, Hahashemi *et al.*, (2011) attempted to study the relationship between the Multiple intelligences and language learning Strategy use among Iranian high school students. The sample consisted of two hundred and twenty-nine students who responded to McKenzie's (1999) MI inventory and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Questionnaire. The results showed positive correlation between MI profiles and the use of language learning strategies. The findings also indicated that Iranian students mainly utilize meta-cognitive strategies and social strategies respectively.

Yet in another study, Nikoopour *et al.*, (2011) strived to find the strategies used by Iranian EFL learners. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was used for collecting the data. The findings indicated that Iranian EFL students moderately use language learning strategies. They also use metacognitive strategies more than other strategies. In addition, memory strategies were found to be the least used strategy by language learners.

In an attempt to take into account learning styles of students, Salehi & Bagheri (2011) investigated the relationship between learning styles and strategies of students. Two questionnaires and think aloud protocols were administered on 110 Elementary level students in a language institute. The study revealed relationships between the group learning styles and the metacognitive strategies, the kinaesthetic styles and the cognitive, the auditory styles and metacognitive and social strategies, and the compensation strategies, the visual styles and memory strategies.

In one of the few studies considering gender variable, Zare (2010) looked at the use of language learning strategies among Iranian EFL learners in relation to gender. After collecting self-report data, Chi square test was applied. The findings revealed that Iranian learners are moderate strategy users. Also the findings showed that use of language learning strategies differed significantly in terms of gender in that females outperformed males in the use of learning strategies.

A number of points come to one's mind studying the mentioned studies. First, the number of studies on learning strategy use among Iranian students is limited. Second, As far as researchers are informed, there are no studies comparing language learning strategy profile of Undergraduate and BA students. And third, there is limited agreement between the results of studies which have researched the same topic. For example, (2004) asserts researches which have investigated the relationship between gender and strategy use have reached diverse findings. The dearth of studies in this field among Iranian students and the shortcomings of previous studies have led the researchers to conduct this research on the use of the strategies by Iranian learners. Therefore, the following questions were formulated:

Research Questions

1. What types of language learning strategies are used by Iranian students?
2. Is there any significant difference between language learning strategy use of male and female students?
3. Is there any significant difference between language learning strategy use of undergraduate and BA students?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample consisted of 376 students who were selected from among 6000 students in one of the universities of Iran. They had common background in terms of English language proficiency and had not travelled to any foreign country. Their age ranged from 18-23. The participants had registered for summer courses held at the university. In terms of geographical features, they were all from the same region and had much in common in terms of socio cultural factors. As a result, they could be considered suitable for the purpose of study.

Instrumentation

The study utilized a survey method. The survey instrument used was the Oxford (1990) SILL inventory. Apart from the SILL questionnaire, demographic questionnaire was also used to collect the data. SILL has been used widely around the globe for determining language learning strategy use of learners and has been proved to be very reliable. It has statements in the form of a 5-point Likert scale which students must show their agreement ranging from completely agree to completely disagree. This scale has six sub-scales namely memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. The index of the reliability calculated for the present study was $\alpha = .94$.

Procedure

At the outset of the study, necessary consents for conducting the study were obtained and participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary. Then the questionnaires were circulated to the participants. Each session started with a brief description mentioning the general purpose of the study. Responding to the questions were performed in presence of students' instructors and one of the researchers and students were allowed to ask questions regarding the questionnaire items in case of possible problems in understanding the directions. After about 50 minutes, the questionnaires were collected and the process of data analysis started. The responses which were in the format of Likert scale were coded and analyzed using SPSS 12 software. Descriptive statistics including mean and frequencies were calculated and then inferential statistics were run.

RESULTS

What types of language learning strategies are used by Iranian students?

The results of descriptive and inferential data revealed the strategies used by Iranian language learners. As table 1 shows metacognitive strategies are the major strategies used by learners (Males: $M=3.74$, $SD=0.83$) and females ($M=3.56$, $SD=.86$). After metacognitive strategies, social, memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies followed respectively. In addition Affective strategies were the least used one by female students ($M=2.92$, $SD=0.86$) and also the male ones ($M=3.15$, $SD=.98$).

Table 1. The learning strategies used by students based on gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mem. S	Female	224	3.3502	.72517
	Male	152	3.4306	.69833
Comp. S	Female	224	3.0082	.82714
	Male	152	3.2478	.94417
Aff. S	Female	224	2.9293	.86356
	Male	152	3.1557	.98268
Soc. S	Female	224	3.1652	.93458
	Male	152	3.4331	.97433
Cog. S	Female	224	3.0989	.79033
	Male	151	3.3325	.78917
Met. S	Female	224	3.5635	.86050
	Male	152	3.7412	.83391

Is there any significant difference between language learning strategy use of male and female students?

In order to answer this question, independent sample t-test was run and means of strategy use related to male and female students were compared.

As table 2 indicates males used more compensation strategies than females ($t = -2.602$, $p = .01$). Furthermore, males used more effective strategies compared with females ($t = -2.358$, $p = .019$). Additionally, males used more socio affective strategies ($t = -2.682$, $p = .008$), more cognitive strategies ($t = -2.810$, $p = .005$) and also more metacognitive strategies ($t = -1.990$, $p = .047$).

Table 2: Results of Independent sample t- test on the use of learning strategies by males and females

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					
	F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Mem. S	.751	.387	-1.070	.285	-.0804
Com. S	1.927	.166	-2.602	.010	-.2396
Affec. S	4.508	.064	-2.358	.019	-.2264
Socio. S	.070	.791	-2.682	.008	-.2679
Cog. S	.571	.450	-2.810	.005	-.2337
Metacog. S	1.282	.258	-1.990	.047	-.1777

Is there any significant difference between language learning strategy use of undergraduate and BA students?

Table 3. The learning strategies used by students based on educational level

	LEVEL	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mem. S	Undergraduate	145	3.3962	.72658
	BA	230	3.3734	.70987
Comp. S	Undergraduate	145	3.2563	.85910
	BA	230	3.0072	.88724
Aff. S	Undergraduate	145	3.1241	.97772
	BA	230	2.9551	.87801
Soc. S	Undergraduate	145	3.4356	.92425
	BA	230	3.1659	.96588
Cog. S	Undergraduate	144	3.2723	.77931
	BA	230	3.1379	.80299
Met. S	Undergraduate	145	3.7900	.79469
	BA	230	3.5338	.87508

Table 3 indicates the distribution of language learning strategies used by undergraduate and BA students. Metacognitive strategies are the mostly used strategies by undergraduate students ($M = 3.79$, $SD = .79$). On the other hand, affective strategies are the least used ones ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .97$). Regarding BA students, Metacognitive strategies are the mostly used strategies ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .87$) and affective strategies the least used ones ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .87$) as is the case with undergraduate ones.

Table 4. Results of Independent sample t- test on the use of learning strategies by Undergraduate and BA students

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					
	F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Mem. S	.181	.671	.299	.765	.0227
Com. S	.017	.897	2.680	.008	.2491
Affec. S	3.367	.067	1.737	.083	.1691
Socio. S	.740	.390	2.677	.008	.2697
Cog. S	.057	.811	1.593	.112	.1344
Metacog. S	2.823	.094	2.860	.004	.2562

The results of independent sample t-test revealed there is a significant difference between undergraduate and BA students regarding the use of language strategies ($p \leq .05$). There were significant differences in the use of compensation ($p = .00$), social ($p = .00$), and metacognitive strategies as undergraduate students used more strategies in these three variables compared with BA ones. However, undergraduate and BA students did not show significant difference in the use of Memory ($p = .76$), Affective ($p = .08$), and cognitive strategies ($p = .11$) (see table 4).

DISSCUSION

The study aimed to shed light on language learning strategy use by Iranian students and its interplay with gender and educational level. The findings reveal that metacognitive strategies are the major types of strategies used by learners. This is in agreement with previous studies which state that learners use metacognitive strategies more than other strategies (e.g., Hahashemi *et al.*, 2011; Nikoopour *et al.*, 2011). This can be attributed to the educational system and the skills which are necessary in this system. The type of instruction offered at schools and universities may have reinforced this strategy more than the others. As for the use of strategies taking gender into account interesting results were found i.e. males used more strategies compared with females. This finding is in contrast with previous studies (e.g., Zare, 2010). In addition, Affective strategies were the least used one by female students. This is also another impressive finding as we expected females to report more use of affective strategies due to the fact that it is thought emotional and affective part is strong in females. Furthermore, males used more compensation strategies than females. One possible explanation of this may be socio-cultural context of Iran that males have more communication in the society as they are more actively engaged in the communication pattern necessary for maintain the relations in society. Another finding was that males used more affective, social, cognitive, and also more metacognitive strategies. These strategies are necessary for achieving good results in learning and communication.

In terms of educational level, among BA students, metacognitive strategies are the mostly used strategies and affective strategies the least used ones as is the case with undergraduate ones. The study didn't show significant differences between Undergraduate and BA students in the use of Memory, Affective, and cognitive strategies ; However, there were significant differences in the use of compensation, social and metacognitive strategies in that undergraduate students used more strategies in these three variables compared with BA ones. This was surprising as we expected BA students to report more frequent use of these strategies because of more years of education; however, this was not the case. Generally, these findings can have a number of explanations. The prevalent use of some strategies and the scarcity of some others may be attributable to many factors such as the tasks and skills that are necessary in one's academic or real life. For example, if students are asked to control their learning and how it is happening, this can lead to more use of metacognitive strategies. However, if the situation not be appropriate for a kind of strategy, it will not grow a lot. It must be noted that all of the skills and strategies are necessary for a successful student and care must be exercised in

reinforcing some strategies and ignoring some others. Different strategies are complementary and should work together to produce efficient results.

As mentioned earlier, various language learning strategies are very important and teachers must gear their teaching to students' strategies. Beside this, teachers should teach efficient strategies to students in order to help them find the best ways for learning a language. This also can be achieved by creating a class atmosphere which necessitates students' engagement in different activities. It would be very helpful if language learning strategy pattern of successful students be determined and be applied for future teaching. This can be done in casual classrooms as a part of skill development portion or can be applied in separate and specialized courses for strategy teaching. In strategy teaching classes, teachers must make students familiar with effective strategies and techniques as a path to successful academic performance.

Also, it is highly recommended that teachers and practitioners use strategy inventories in order to find the pattern of students strategy use and consequently move to that direction. As Nikoopour *et al.*, (2011) rightly contend, it is vital that studies on learning strategies go on in different directions for a thorough understanding of education. As such, strategy instruction can assist learners in the process of learning skills and knowledge necessary in one's academic life.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigates language-learning strategies used by Iranian students. It also strives to find if there are any differences between male and female students and undergraduate and BA ones in terms of strategy use. The findings revealed that students mostly use metacognitive strategies compared with other strategies. On the other hand, affective strategies were the least used ones. As for the frequency of use of learning strategies, unlike previous studies, this study showed that males use more strategies than females. The findings of the present study may provide suggestions to educators to adjust their teaching to students' strategy use thereby presenting a mixture of opportunities for students in the classroom. As such, it is highly recommended that before any teaching, learners' needs and strategies be determined and used in order to offer an effective instruction. Furthermore, administering studies on learning strategy use among students in other countries especially in the context of Asia will produce results that are more precise.

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