

A Synthesis of Selected Language Learning Strategy Studies in Iran

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Abstract

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define learning strategies as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information" (p. 1). In recent decades, many Iranian scholars have concentrated on learning strategies as an effective way for acquiring knowledge. This paper aims to have a profound, comparative look at the start, development and the current position of EFL learning strategy field of study in Iran.

Key words: Learning strategies; EFL; Iranian EFL learners

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THE FOCUS OF RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF EFL LEARNING STRATEGIES IN IRAN

The analysis of studies conducted in Iran indicates that they are mostly descriptive in nature focusing on the impact of metacognitive awareness on written skills and mostly ignore speaking skill, while a few studies have focused on metacognitive listening strategies awareness (Rahimi & Katal, 2012).

All the studies conducted in the field of language learning strategies in Iran, according to their focus, can be

classified into six categories:

a. Identifying the strategies used by successful or unsuccessful language learners (Gerami & Baighlou, 2011),

b. Investigating the relationship between students' use of language learning strategies and their learning achievement (Akbari, 2003; Salehi & Farzad, 2003; Zare & Sarmadi, 2004),

c. Looking at students' strategic performance in different language skill areas (Meshkat & Nasirifirouz, 2009; Shirani Bidabadi & Yamat, 2010; Sutudenama & Taghipur, 2010; Mehrak Rahimi & Katal, 2010; ShiraniBidabadi & Yamat, 2011; Khatib, Hassanzadeh & Rezaei, 2011),

d. The factors that affect the learners' use of different learning strategies (Tajedin, 2001; Mohammad Rahimi, Riazi, & Saif, 2008),

e. Strategy instruction outcomes (Maleki, 2005; Motallebzadeh & Mamdoohi, 2011) and finally,

f. Subjects' preferences in the use of language learning strategies (Lachini, 1997; Pishghadam, 2009; Nikoopour, Farsani & Neishabouri, 2011).

In the following section, examples supporting the aforementioned classification of studies in the field of language learning strategies are presented and reviewed.

a. Successful or Unsuccessful Language Learners' Strategies

Gerami and Baighlou (2011), referring to language as a socially mediated phenomenon proved the logic of their study which was a replication of a foreign study with the aim of extracting Iranian EFL learners' learning strategies to make a comparison between the students of different proficiencies. In their study, using Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), they examined the application of language learning strategies by successful and unsuccessful Iranian EFL students. They found that successful EFL students use a wider range of learning strategies (often metacognitive) and different from those often preferred by their unsuccessful peers (surface level

cognitive strategies).

b. Language Learning Strategy Use and Language Learning Achievement

Akbari (2003) used SILL to investigate the relationship between the use of language learning strategies by 128 Iranian EFL university students and their EFL proficiency. The results demonstrated that, on the whole, metacognitive strategies are more popular among Iranian EFL learners, while advanced students use cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies more than other strategies. Also, he found that compensation strategies can predict the proficiency level of students to a greater degree compared with other learning strategies. Moreover, he examined the relationship between learners' IQ scores and strategy use and found no significant relationship between them.

Salehi and Farzad (2003) studied the relationship between metacognitive knowledge, learning conception and EFL proficiency among more than 300 Iranian students. In order to carry out the research, they utilized state metacognition inventory which is developed and validated by O'Neil and Abedi (1996), learning conception interview based on Saljo's (1979) study, and a researcher-made EFL proficiency test. The findings revealed a reinforcing relationship between metacognitive knowledge, learning conception and EFL proficiency of the participants. Furthermore, significant differences were observed between proficient and less proficient students in their metacognitive awareness and conception of learning, while gender was reported as a non-influential variable.

Zare and Sarmadi (2004) examined the difference between poor and competent university students in their metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies' awareness. They administrated two researcher-made questionnaires to check the metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategy awareness of B.A. students. The results indicated that metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies awareness affect students' academic achievement. Similarly, Salarifar and Pakdaman (2010) investigated the role of metacognitive state components on academic performance. The participants who were high-school students completed O'Neill and Abedi's (1996) Metacognitive State Questionnaire. The findings represented a positive correlation between metacognitive state and academic performance.

c. Strategic Performance in Different Language Skills Areas

Meshkat and Nasirifiruz (2009) studied self-evaluation as a metacognitive strategy in grammar enhancement. Nelson's (1976) test, and six researcher-made grammar tests were used for data collection. The results revealed that self-evaluation had positive effects on enhancing students' grammatical knowledge.

ShiraniBidabadi and Yamat (2010) investigated the relationship between listening strategies employed by Iranian EFL freshman university students and their

learning style preferences. They used Vandergrift *et al.*'s (2006) Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) and listening strategy questionnaire of Archer (2002). Descriptive analysis of the data revealed that freshman Iranian EFL students employed metacognitive listening strategies such as planning, directed attention and selective attention the most. Also regarding learning style preferences, they considered themselves as communicative learners. The researchers found that there was a significant association between Iranian freshman students' learning style preferences and the use of listening strategies.

Sutudena and Taghipur (2010) studied the relationship between motivation, metacognitive knowledge of learning strategies and listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. They used MALQ (Vandergrift *et al.*, 2006) and Gardner's (1985) belief and motivation questionnaire along with think-aloud protocol. The results of the study implied that skilled listeners used more strategies than less skilled listeners. In addition, less skilled listeners used inappropriate strategies more than skilled listeners. It was also found that highly motivated students and less motivated students were not different in their strategy use in general; however, highly motivated students were different in the use of only two strategies from less motivated students. In general, results implied positive correlation between listening comprehension and motivation.

Rahimi and Katal (2010) investigated the level of Iranian university students' metacognitive listening strategies awareness in learning English by administering MALQ (Vandergrift *et al.*, 2006) among university students of different majors. The overall results showed that more than 60% of the participants were fully or considerably aware of their metacognitive listening strategies. It was also found that girls and boys were not different with regard to their general metacognitive awareness of listening strategies. However, girls' awareness in directed attention was significantly higher than boys'. Furthermore, EFL students were found to be more aware of their problem solving, planning and evaluation strategies and non-EFL majors were found to be more aware of their mental translation strategies.

ShiraniBidabadi and Yamat (2011) examined the relationship between learning strategies used by Iranian EFL freshman university students and their listening proficiency. They used Oxford Placement Test developed by Allen (1992) and the modified version of MALQ (Vandergrift, 1997; Vandergrift *et al.*, 2006). They carried out descriptive analysis on the data gathered from advanced, intermediate, and lower-intermediate university students and found that these students used metacognitive strategies more frequently, followed by cognitive and socio-affective listening strategies. They also found a positive correlation between students' listening proficiency level and the use of learning strategies.

Khatib *et al.* (2011) studied the possible correlations among 146 Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency, use of vocabulary learning strategies and gender through a survey. The results showed that 11.4% of the variance in the learners' EFL proficiency can be explained by three strategy categories involving self-motivation, word organization and authentic language use. In addition, no significant difference existed between learners' gender and their choice of vocabulary learning strategies.

d. Factors Affecting the Learners' Use of Different Learning Strategies

Tajedin (2001), using eighty-item SILL, investigated the correlation between the use of learning strategies, gender, language proficiency and learning situation. He found that Iranian students use metacognitive strategies more frequently and affective strategies less frequently than other learning strategies. Also, he found that men and women were not different in their use of learning strategies.

In another study, Mohammad Rahimi *et al.* (2008) examined the use of language learning strategies by 196 low-, mid- and high proficiency post-secondary level Persian EFL learners in correlation with their attitude, motivation, learning style, gender and years of language study. The results pointed to proficiency level and motivation as major predictors of the use of language learning strategies, while gender was not found to have any effect, and years of language study appeared to negatively predict strategy use. Also, learners' preference inclined toward the use of metacognitive strategies with the increase in their language proficiency. Recently, Kafipour *et al.* (2011) examined the influence of motivation and gender on the choice of language learning strategies by 156 Iranian post-graduate students, who were selected based on a two-step cluster sampling, in Kerman province. The data was gathered using a translated version of SILL. Attitude/motivation test battery (AMTB) (Gardner, 1985) was also employed to identify the participants' type of motivation. Data analysis indicated that: a) the participants reported the use of compensation, social, metacognitive, and affective strategies at a high level, whereas memory and cognitive strategies were reported at a medium level; b) integratively-motivated students showed higher overall strategies mean score than instrumentally-motivated ones, but this difference was not statistically significant, i.e. instrumentally-motivated students employed memory strategies more frequently than integratively-motivated students; c) female students employed strategies more frequently than male students; however, this difference was found not to be statistically significant too. The findings also showed that teachers should encourage learners to actively employ all the strategies in their learning process.

e. Strategy Instruction Outcomes

Maleki (2005) investigated the effect of cognitive and metacognitive strategies on the improvement of different school subjects such as English. Two hundred and seventy

high-school students participated in his study. In order to carry out a quasi-experimental study, he chose twelve lessons from specified subjects for practice and devised six exam questions from these lessons and administered them in pre- and post-test steps. He found that cognitive strategies were useful in learning physics while metacognitive strategies were only useful in social lessons but neither were found useful in learning English.

Motallebzadeh and Mamdoohi (2011) determined the possible effects cognitive learning strategies may have on the improvement of reading comprehension through an experimental study of two groups of potential TOEFL takers. The experimental group was instructed in reading comprehension through the cognitive reading strategies, while the control group received no information on strategies. After one month of instruction, the results of the post-test indicated significant improvement in the experimental group scores, supporting the usefulness of strategy instruction in the field of reading comprehension enhancement.

f. Subjects' Preferences in the Use of Language Learning Strategies

Lachini (1997) made use of O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) questionnaire to collect data from sixty Iranian students. He found that Iranian students use cognitive and metacognitive strategies more than other learning strategies and intermediate to advanced students make more use of learning strategies than less competent students.

Pishghadam (2009) studied the relationship between the use of learning strategies, gender and the preferred learning strategies for learning English by Iranian students. He administrated SILL among 3000 Iranian university students. The findings of the study demonstrated that Iranian students use metacognitive strategies more than other strategies and affective strategies less than other learning strategies. Moreover, men and women were not reported to be different in their use of learning strategies in general, but men were found to use social and memory strategies more when compared with other strategies.

Another study was carried out with the intention of investigating the most preferred strategy/strategies by Iranian EFL students. The instrument utilized in the study was once more SILL. The findings revealed that, in terms of overall strategy use, Iranian EFL learners are moderate strategy users in general. They also preferred to use metacognitive strategies most frequently and memory strategies least frequently (Nikoopour *et al.*, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Regarding the studies on language learning strategies in Iran, some points are worth mentioning. First, study on learning strategies in Iran started at least two decades after its world beginning which according to O'Malley

and Chamot (1990) and Cohen (1990) started with the pioneering works by Rubin (1975) who compared the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful second or foreign language learners as well as the strategies used by them in achieving their goal (fluency in the new language). Second, although there has been great emphasis by specialists such as Oxford (1990), Cohen (1998), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Fotovatian and Shokrpour (2007) that the successful learners' strategies must be extracted to be taught to lower level learners and the unsuccessful learners' strategies must also be extracted to be rejected by the instructors and learners, very few studies in Iran have concentrated on this fundamental need. Third, the variables under investigation in these studies in Iran are very narrow in span, disregarding many other effective variables that may greatly affect the use of strategies. For example, Abraham and Vann (1987), Bialystok (1981), Rubin (1975) refer to age, sex, attitude, motivation, aptitude, learning stage, task requirements, teacher expectation, learning styles, individual differences, cultural differences, beliefs about language learning, and language proficiency as some of these influential factors. As it is clear from the studies reviewed here, many of these variables are absent from the works of Iranian researchers in the field. Fourth, the most widely used instrument in most of these studies has been SILL; however, its validity and reliability have not been checked with Iranian students. SILL's developer, Oxford (1990), asserts that people of different cultures approach learning tasks differently and therefore discovering and analyzing their strategies will help teachers, learners and material and curriculum developers in a given culture to maximize the efficiency of teaching and learning in the language programs. And finally the fifth point to consider is that, in spite of the huge number of studies on language learning strategies conducted in Iran, the subject has not undergone profound and through investigation. This field of study is yet a young immature one which calls for extra more detailed expeditions.

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