

IN THE NAME OF GOD

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The Role of Context of Learning in Language Learning Strategy
Use Among Iranian EFL Learners

By

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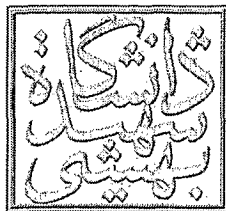
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Abstract

The concept of learning strategies has become quite familiar to most professionals in teaching English as a foreign language. The present study aims at investigating the role of context of learning in language learning strategy use among Iranian EFL learners. To conduct the study, 224 students (113 males and 111 females) were chosen at the contexts of pre-university, private school, and university. Using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), the researcher investigated EFL learning strategy use among the participant of the study. In order to investigate the significant difference in strategy use in these contexts, the researcher conducted a One-way ANOVA and the results showed that there was a significant difference in overall language learning strategy use. The results showed that there was a significant difference in using cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies among learners in these contexts. To investigate the relationship between strategy use and gender in each of these three contexts, the researcher ran an independent *t*-test and the results showed that there was a significant relationship between gender and strategy use just in the context of private school. The results of the study showed that metacognitive strategies were favored most by learners in these three contexts and affective strategies were favored least in the contexts of pre-university and private school and memory strategies were favored least among university students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Since the pioneering research studies carried out on language learning strategies in the mid-seventies (for instance Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975), there has been a growing awareness that language learning strategies have the potential to be “an extremely powerful learning tool” (O’Malley, et al. 1985). In spite of this awareness and in spite of much useful and interesting work which has been carried out in the intervening years (nearly a quarter of a century), the language learning strategy field continues to be characterized by “confusion” and “no consensus” (O’Malley et al, 1985). For example, Ellis (1994) comments that the language learning strategy concept remains “fuzzy”.

Various definitions have been given to language learning strategies. In general, these definitions refer to language learning strategies as “operations, techniques, steps, processes, behaviors, or thoughts” used by learners to guide, facilitate, and solve problems in their language learning and language use. However, one controversial issue in defining language learning strategies is the degree of learners’ consciousness when using them (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). The definitions proposed for language learning strategies seem to suggest that they are conscious actions, but their use over time makes them automatic, i.e. unconscious (Oxford, 1990, p.17). Cohen’s view (1998) is that learning strategies are ‘either within the focal attention of the learners or within their peripheral attention, in that learners can identify them if asked about what they have just done or thought’. Willing (1989, p. 8) points out that learning entails assimilation and language learning strategies are characterized as means learners use to transform the external input into internal and personal resources and skills. For Oxford, they are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations”(1998, p.10). Rubin and Wenden (1987) view them in terms of ‘behaviors learners engage in to learn and regulate the learning of a second language’ (p. 6). At least five main features can be inferred from the literature reviewed:

- a) Strategies play an important role in second language learning as they promote and facilitate language learning:
- b) Learners themselves are the actual agents in their use and choice of strategies as they are directly affected by them:
- c) language learning, as learning in general, has to be internalized and strategies are in fact problem solving mechanisms or techniques used by learners to cope with the complex process of learning:
- d) Learning strategies are not always observable to the human eye. This explains why foreign language teachers, in general, are not conscious of them; and
- e) Strategies are flexible and it is logical to think that they can be taught and learners can be trained in their management. As a consequence of that, it is possible to speak of strategy training or learner training as the techniques used by teachers to make learners aware of their own strategies and train them in practice or modify or substitute their strategies.

There has been extensive research on what good learners do in the context of second language learning (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). Many researchers have described successful language learners and their strategies; one major finding among them is that successful language learners use more and better language learning strategies than do poor learners (Oxford, 1989, 1993). These early researchers tended to make lists of strategies supposed to be crucial for all good language learners. According to Oxford (1989), different learners use different kinds of learning strategies, e.g. an introverted, analytic person learns through grammar drills and sentence analysis. In contrast, an extrovert sociable, globally oriented person gets the general meaning without knowing every word. Another student may use gestures to communicate in the classroom when the words do not come to mind.

Early work on language learning strategies (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) suggests there are successful language learners and thus successful language learning strategies and that teaching these strategies to less successful students might help them improve their performance. However, later research showed that some unsuccessful learners actually use many of the same strategies as more successful peers do (Vann & Abraham, 1990).

Getting to know this fact, the black and white view of classifying learners as good and bad or successful and unsuccessful started accumulating dust and the new era of 'appropriateness of strategy use' and 'sources of variation in learning strategy use' emerged.

Sources of variation in language learning strategy use are quite many. Much research has been conducted, synthesizing the sources of this variation to answer the question of what affect people's choice of language learning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989, 1990; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Anderson, 1995; Wharton, 2000).

In accordance with Cohen (2005) the strategies learners use and the effectiveness of these strategies depend on learners themselves (e.g., their age, gender, language aptitude, intelligence, cognitive and learning style preferences, self-concept/image, personality, attitudes, motivation, prior knowledge), the learning task at hand (e.g., the type, complexity, difficulty, and generality), and the learning context (e.g., the learning culture, the richness of input and output opportunities). We must view strategies within this larger framework to properly interpret their role in the language learning process. Oxford (1989) and Oxford & Nyikos (1989) have also shown that language learning strategies are influenced by attitude, motivation, age, personality, general learning style, national origin, attitude, proficiency in the language, perceived proficiency, and task requirements.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The context of learning and the cultural values of the learner's society can be expected to have a strong influence on the choice and acceptability of language learning strategies. For example, in a culture and context that prizes individual competition and has organized its educational system around competitive tasks, successful language learners may prefer strategies that allow them to work alone rather than social strategies that call for collaboration with others (Chamot, 2004).

Researches have also shown that gender is one of the factors that affects the use of language learning strategies. In many EFL strategy frequency studies involving gender, the results have usually favored females as more frequent users of learning strategies (for instance, Green & Oxford, 1993; Oxford, 1993).

Facing this fact that Iranian learners encounter various types of input, problems, and contexts regarding learning English and language learning strategy use and these inputs and contexts may influence the use of language learning strategies, this study aims to identify the strategies used by learners in the context of pre-university, private schools, and universities and also to identify whether there is any significant difference in the type and frequency of strategies used by learners in these contexts and then to investigate the relationship between gender and language learning strategy use in these contexts.

1.3 The significance of the study

Language learning strategy research has increasingly recognized the contexts in which the strategies are used. Because strategies are goal-oriented and the context has influence on these goals, the use of strategies varies greatly according to the context. This fact has strongly encouraged strategy researchers to conduct their studies in various contexts to see how different contexts affect the use of language learning strategies. Hsiao and Oxford (2002), for example, identified the influence of learning contexts on strategy use as an important topic for future research using the SILL.

1.4 Research questions

1. What are the types and frequency of learning strategies used by pre-university students?
2. What are the types and frequency of learning strategies used by private school students?
3. What are the types and frequency of learning strategies used by university students?

4. Is there any significant difference between the type and frequency of learning strategies used by learners in these three different contexts of use (pre-university, private schools, and universities)?
5. Is there any relationship between gender and language learning strategy use in these contexts?

1.5 Rationale of the study

Learning strategies play a major role in language learning. Strategies help language learners retrieve and store material, and facilitate their learning. Strategy use correlates with students' language proficiency (Oxford, 2001) and self-confidence (Chamot, 1994). Research has shown that the degree of success in language learning depends greatly on the strategies learners use.

There are many studies on the effect of context of culture and context of learning on language learning strategy use. For example, Bedell (1993) found that compensation strategies are most frequently used by Chinese students. The findings of Grainger (1997) indicated that no significant differences in overall strategy use emerged among Asian, English, and European background students. Griffiths and Parr (2000) reported that those students who studied in Europe used language learning strategies significantly more frequently than students of other contexts, especially strategies relating to vocabulary, to reading, to interaction with others and to the tolerance of ambiguity. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) found that Asian students tend to prefer their own established rote learning strategies.

The value of contextual approach is to reveal the extent to which language learning strategies are part of students' experiences, interrelated with their environment, and also to reveal how strategies function in different aspects of language learning. A contextual approach is also a useful lens to apply to understanding how strategy use relates to students' experiences and the actions that they take as learners both inside and outside the classroom. Early work on the role of gender in learning strategy use was conducted primarily by Oxford and colleagues and they found gender had rules in language learning strategy use.

Studies which have examined the relationship between gender and strategy use have come to mixed conclusions. Ehrman and Oxford (1989) and Oxford and Nyikos (1989) discovered distinct gender differences in strategy use. The study by Green and Oxford (1995) came to the same conclusion. Ehrman and Oxford's (1990) study, however failed to discover any evidence of differing language learning strategy use between the genders. It might be concluded, perhaps, that, although men and women do not always demonstrate differences in language learning strategy use, where differences are found women tend to use more language learning strategies than men. Therefore, it can be proposed that there is a need for researching into what kinds of strategies Iranian students use. In this study the researcher wants to investigate how the context of learning affects language learning strategy use by Iranian students and also to investigate whether there are any significant differences between genders in language learning strategy use in these contexts.

1.6 Definition of key terms

Language learning strategies: in general, the way in which learners attempt to work out the meanings and uses of words, grammatical rules, and other aspects of language they are learning (Richards, et al. 2002).

Context: The context of learning, shaped by educational/cultural values of the society in which individuals are studying a new language, combined with language learners goals together determine the types of learning tasks engaged in and thus the types of learning strategies that can be expected to best assist learning (Chamot, 2004).

Cognitive Strategies: skills that involve manipulation or transformation of the language in some direct way, e.g., through reasoning, analysis, note taking, functional practice in naturalistic settings, formal practice with structures and sounds, etc (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

Memory Strategies: techniques specifically tailored to help the learner store new information in memory and retrieve it later (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

Compensation Strategies: behaviors used to compensate for missing knowledge of some kind, e.g., inferencing (guessing) while listening or reading, or using synonyms or circumlocution while speaking or writing (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

Metacognitive Strategies: behaviors used for centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating one's learning. These "beyond-the-cognitive" strategies are used to provide "executive control" over the learning process (Oxford & Crookall, 1989)

Affective Strategies: techniques like self-reinforcement and positive self-talk which help learners gain better control over their emotions, attitudes, and motivations related to language learning (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

Social Strategies: actions involving other people in the language learning process. Examples are questioning, cooperating with peers, and developing empathy. (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

1.7 Limitations of the study

Researchers always face some limitations in doing their research. However, they always try to narrow the limitations down. It should be mentioned that this study is not an exception; therefore, the researcher faced some limitations.

One of the limitations of the study is that the number of subjects from whom data were collected is small, hence making it difficult to generalize the findings of this research to the entire population of students in Iran. The other limitation of the study is that the level of proficiency of the students was not completely homogenized and the researcher just tried to partially homogenize the students. Another limitation of the study like all studies which use questionnaire for collecting data is that students may have reported some strategies which in fact they did not use.

Chapter 2

Review of literature

2.1 Introduction

This study investigated the role of context of learning in language learning strategy use among Iranian EFL students and in this part of the study the researcher reviewed the related literature to provide the readers with some evidence with the topic of this study.

2.2 Terminology

Although the term strategy is used by many prominent writers such as Rubin (1975), O'Malley et al (1985), and Oxford (1990), it is not without its controversy. Consensus is not assisted by some writers' use of conflicting terminology such as learning behaviors (Politzer and McGroarty, (1985), tactics (Seliger, 1984) and techniques (Stern, 1992) more or less (but not always exactly) synonymously with the term strategy. Larson-Freeman and Long (1991) opt for the term strategy since, as they point out, Rubin (1975) used it in perhaps the earliest study in this area and it enjoys the widest currency today. For this reason, strategy is the term which will be used in many studies and the present study.

2.3 Background of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

Research into language learning strategies began in the 1960s. Particularly, developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies (Williams and Burden, 1997, p.149). In most of the research on language learning strategies, the primary concern has been on "identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language." (Rubin and Wenden, 1987, p.19). In 1966, Aaron Carton published his study entitled *The Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study*, which was the first attempt on learner strategies. After Carton, in 1971, Rubin started doing research focusing on the strategies of successful learners and stated that, once identified, such strategies could be made available to less successful learners. Rubin (1975) classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. Wong-Fillmore (1976), Tarone (1980), Naiman et al. (1978), Bialystok (1979), Cohen and Apeh (1981), Wenden (1982), Chamot and

O'Malley (1987), Politzer and McGroarty (1985), Conti and Kolsody (1997), and many others studied strategies used by language learners during the process of foreign language learning.

2.4 Definition of Language Learning Strategies

Since the work done by researchers such as Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) in the mid seventies, awareness has been slowly growing of the importance of strategies used by learners in the language learning process, since ultimately, like the proverbial horse led to water but which must do the drinking itself, even with the best teachers and methods. Students are the only ones who can actually do the learning. As Nyikos and Oxford (1993, p.11) put it: "learning begins with the learner".

This growing awareness has resulted in more recent years in what Skehan (1989) calls an "explosion of activity" in the field of language learning strategy research. In spite of this activity, however, defining and classifying language learning strategies remains no easy task. Wenden and Rubin (1987) talk of the elusive nature of the term, Ellis (1994) describe the concepts as fuzzy, while O'Malley et al (1985) put it in this way:

There is no consensus on what constitutes a learning strategy in second language learning or how these differ from other types of learner activities. Learning, teaching, and communication strategies are often interlaced in discussions of language learning and are often applied to the same behavior. Further, even within the group of activities most often referred to as learning strategies, there is no considerable confusion about definitions of specific strategies and about hierarchic relationship among strategies.

The term language learning strategy has been defined by many researchers. Tarone (1983) defined a learning strategy as "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language -- to incorporate these into one's interlanguage competence". Rubin (1987) later wrote that LS "are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly". In their seminal study, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined LS as "the special

thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1). Wenden and Rubin (1987) define learning strategies as "... any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information." Richards and Platt (1992) state that learning strategies are "intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information. According to Stern (1992), "the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques." Finally, building on work in her book for teachers (Oxford, 1990), Oxford (1992/1993) provides specific examples of LLS (i.e., "In learning ESL, Trang watches U.S. TV soap operas, guessing the meaning of new expressions and predicting what will come next") and this helpful definition:

...language learning strategies -- specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability. (Oxford, 1992/1993). All language learners use language learning strategies either consciously or unconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks in the language classroom. Since language classroom is like a problem-solving environment in which language learners are likely to face new input and difficult tasks given by their instructors, learners' attempts to find the quickest or easiest way to do what is required, that is, using language learning strategies is inescapable.

From these definitions, a change over time may be noted: from the early focus on the product of LLS (linguistic or sociolinguistic competence), there is now a greater emphasis on the processes and the characteristics of LLS. At the same time, we should note that LLS are distinct from learning styles, which refer more broadly to a learner's "natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills" (Reid, 1995), though there appears to be an obvious relationship