IN THE NAME OF GOD,
THE COMPASSIONATE, THE MERCIFUL

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M.A. Thesis

Identifying the Strategies Persian EFL Learners Use in Reading an Expository Text in English and Examining its Relation to Reading-Proficiency and Motivation: A Think-aloud Study

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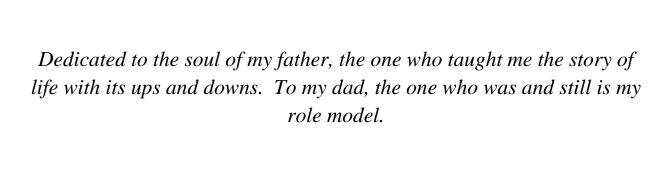
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Dedicated to the soul of my father, the one who taught me the story of life with its ups and downs. To my dad, the one who was and still is my role model.

Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to identify the type and frequency of strategies Persian EFL students used while reading an expository text in English. This study also investigated the difference in strategy use between good and poor readers majoring in Applied Linguistics. The relationship between strategy use and reading-proficiency on the one hand and strategy use and motivation on the other hand were also examined. This study was conducted with 30 participants who completed a) the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) containing 50 statements, b) 30 statements adopted from the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), and c) a Background Information Questionnaire (BIQ). Based on a non-random purposive sampling 8 participants were chosen from among the 30 students to take part in a think-aloud session followed by a semi-structured interview. The results indicated that the EFL learners used cognitive strategies_ in particular translating, underlining, and summarizing_ more frequently than the other strategies. However, in contrast to most studies in this field, socio-affective strategies were not used at all by the participants. The think-aloud protocols revealed some differences in strategy use between the good and poor readers (such as: purpose of strategy use, variety of strategies used, and flexibility in strategy use) but these differences were not significant according to the quantitative results. The triangulation of data showed a positive relationship between strategy use and reading-proficiency. A strong positive relationship was revealed between strategy use and motivation. Overall, the findings of this study imply the need for classroom pedagogy to explicitly integrate strategy instruction and to address the motivational aspect of learning for the purpose of motivating student involvement and enhancing learning effectiveness.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Learning a language is a complex phenomenon, whether it is in the first language or the second language. The four major skills one must acquire in order to become proficient in a particular language are: (a) listening, (b) speaking, (c) reading, and (d) writing. In an academic environment reading is considered more crucial than any other language skill (Alfassi, 2004). Moreover, reading well has been lauded for a century as one of the most crucial human accomplishments (Huey, 1908). Reading is the only skill in which learners can control its speed and read in privacy. In addition, reading comprehension provides the basis for a substantial amount of learning. However, knowing how to read the words in a text cannot do students any good if they are not able to construct the meaning. Thus, becoming familiar with reading strategies and knowing how to use them in the right place, at the right time could help learners read more efficiently.

Recently, research in reading has shifted away from focusing on the product of reading, such as scores on reading comprehension tests to the process of reading   with   particular   attenti

on to strategies that readers use to aid comprehension in various reading contexts (Anderson, 1991; Carrell, 1989). But prior to being able to instruct students on the use of reading strategies, reading research needs to identify the type of strategy students use while reading.

The term language learning strategy, in this study, is defined as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p.8). According to Pritchard (1990) a reading strategy specifically refers to a deliberate action that readers take voluntarily to develop an understanding of what they read.

As thus, a question that comes up is: What variables are related to the choice and the use of learner strategies while reading a text in L2? A rationale behind this inquiry is that strategy instruction should be geared to learners' individual and situational needs. According to Cohen (2007) 'this justifies the reason for studying the effect of individual, group, and situational variables on strategy use' (p.70).

This study examined the type and frequency of strategies used by Persian EFL learners while reading an expository text in English. It also took into consideration the difference in strategy use among good and poor readers. Finally, the relationship between strategy use and reading proficiency and also strategy use and motivation were analyzed as well. This chapter presents: (a) the statement of the problem, (b) the purpose of the study, (c) the research questions, (d) the significance of the study, (e) the definition of key terms, (f) key design decisions, and (g) organization of the thesis.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to identify the kind and frequency of strategies used by Persian EFL learners while reading an expository text. This study also aimed to investigate the differences in strategy use of good and poor Persian EFL readers. The study also examined the possible relationship between strategy use and reading proficiency, on the one hand, and strategy use and motivation on the other hand.

Most Iranian students bring a repertoire of reading strategies to their studies as a result of being assigned reading tasks throughout learning English in high-school and at university. However, they do not appear to have sufficient training with regard to how to selectively and efficiently apply reading strategies in dealing with both foreign language and new written material simultaneously. Consequently, many of them find reading to be a major difficulty.

Therefore, the strategies used by Persian EFL students need to be identified, in order for instructors to possibly assist learners in making effective modifications in the strategies they already use and take into consideration new strategies which could be adopted by L2 readers. Furthermore, unlike strategy research conducted in the U.S., European countries, and Asian countries, strategy research in Iran has mostly examined strategy use using self-report questionnaires. Few studies have tried to identify the specific type of strategies students use while engaged in a reading task through a mixed-method design.

As noted by Griffiths and Parr (2001), over the years many different methods and approaches to the teaching and learning of language to and by

speakers of other languages, each with its own theoretical basis, have come and gone in and out of fashion. Language learning strategies, although still fuzzily defined and controversially classified, are increasingly attracting the interest of contemporary educators because of their potential to enhance learning. In the light of this interest, it seems necessary to take a look at the theory underlying language learning strategies beginning from the perspective of the various other theories, methods and approaches from which, and alongside which, language learning strategy theory has developed.

Derived from the way Latin and Greek were taught, the grammar-translation method, as its name suggests, relied heavily on the teaching of grammar and practicing translation as its main teaching and learning activities (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992). The possibility that students might use language learning strategies to promote their own learning had little or no place in grammar-translation theory, and is rarely if ever mentioned in any literature on the subject. This point is supported by Tarone and Yule (1989, p.133) when they comment "relatively little attention seems to have been paid, in any consistent way, to considerations of the whole process from the learner's point of view".

In the 1960s, Chomsky's theories viewing the learner as a generator of rules was taken up by Corder (1967), who argued that language errors made by students indicate the development of underlying linguistic competence and reflect the learners' attempts to organize linguistic input. This view of language learning allowed for the possibility of learners making deliberate attempts to control their own learning and, along with theories of cognitive processes in language learning promoted by writers such as McLaughlin (1978) and Bialystok (1978), contributed to a research thrust in the mid to

late seventies aimed at discovering how learners employ learning strategies to promote the learning of language (for instance Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco, 1978). The idea that teachers should be concerned not only with "finding the best method or with getting the correct answer" but also with assisting a student in order to "enable him to learn on his own" (Rubin 1975, p.45) was, at the time, quite revolutionary.

An important theoretical principle underlying the communicative language teaching movement was called "communicative competence" by Hymes (1972). Communicative competence is the ability to use language to convey and interpret meaning, and it was later divided by Canale and Swain (1980) into four separate components: *grammatical competence* (which relates to the learner's knowledge of the vocabulary, phonology and rules of the language), *discourse competence* (which relates to the learner's ability to connect utterances into a meaningful whole), *sociolinguistic competence* (which relates to the learner's ability to use language appropriately) and *strategic competence* (which relates to a learner's ability to employ strategies to compensate for imperfect knowledge). Another cornerstone of communicative language teaching theory is the belief that how language functions is more important than knowledge of form or structure. The concept of the communicative functions of language promoted by Wilkins (1976), have had a strong influence on contemporary language learning programs and textbooks.

Although "the communicative approach implicitly encourages learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning" (Oxford *et al*, 1989, p.33), typically the emphasis in the communicative language movement, as in previous methods and approaches, has been on how teachers teach, with relatively little attention paid to how learners learn.

Awareness has been slowly growing for some time that *"any learning is an active process"* (Rivers, 1983, p.134. Author's italics), and the idea that language learners are individuals who can take charge of their own learning and achieve autonomy by the use of learning strategies has been researched and promoted by educators such as Oxford (1990), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Bialystok (1991), Wenden (1991), and Green and Oxford (1995). There are several important theoretical assumptions which underlie contemporary ideas on language learning strategies. To comment that some students are more successful at learning language than others is, of course, to do no more than state the obvious. Language learning strategy theory postulates that, other things being equal, at least part of this differential success rate is attributable to the varying strategies which different learners bring to the task. From this perspective, which views students as being able to consciously influence their own learning, the learning of language becomes a cognitive process similar in many ways to any other kind of learning (McLaughlin, 1978).

The fact that learning strategy theory can work so easily alongside other theories, methods and approaches means that it has the potential to be a valuable component of contemporary eclectic syllabuses. The arrival of LLS research formed part of a fundamental shift of perspective in thinking about the processes of language learning. Until the 1970s, language learning was seen as a psychological phenomenon. Behaviorist theories approached the problem of learning a language as a question of manipulating the psychology of the individual. The Chomskyan revolution seemed to do little to alter this anti-social view of language learning. Next came Dell Hymes, which provided a new perspective to language learning and teaching. It is in this context that the word strategy gained increasing

prominence as a concept. By the 1980s Canale and Swain (1980) posited strategic competence as one of the four components of communicative competence. Ten years later Bachman (1990) also argued that strategic competence was a part of linguistic competence. What these various approaches to strategic linguistic behavior implied was that second language learning is inherently problematic. A strategy is therefore some form of activity that is used in response to problems when and where they arise.

As thus, it became clear that strategy research needed to be placed in a clear and precise theoretical framework. In 1990, O'malley and Chamot set LLS research within a cognitive framework derived from Anderson's work. Anderson posited a difference between two kinds of information processing_ declarative and procedural_ which is known as knowledge *of* and knowledge *how*. O'malley and Chamot (1990) claimed, on the basis of Anderson's theory, that there was a further fundamental distinction among strategies: metacognitive, cognitive, and social. Oxford (1990) also provided a classification scheme for strategies. For her, strategies could be divided into direct and indirect strategies. This taxonomy had much in common with that of O'malley and Chamot (1990) without necessarily being based on an explicit learning theory.

'The claims made by LLS researchers in the 1990s and up to the present day were: (a) that strategies could continue to be identified under broad categories, despite the difficulties this entailed, (b) that strategy research offered a radical new conceptualization of the language learning process, shifting the emphasis onto the individual learner, (c) that the learning context, nevertheless, was a major influence on the way that individuals and groups used strategies, (d) that strategies were value-neutral, not in themselves good or bad, but were used either effectively

or ineffectively by individuals and by groups, (e) that strategy research continued to offer insights into the complex operations that constituted the process of language learning, and (f) that strategy use and achievement were inextricably linked' (Cohen and Macaro, 2007, p.24).

From among the aforementioned factors, the present research mainly focused on two of the claims mentioned above. First of all, the fourth factor was under study to see whether strategies were used effectively or ineffectively by individuals, in this case by good and poor Persian EFL readers. The last factor stated above was also taken into consideration in this study.

One variable under study was motivation and identifying its relation to strategy use. Language learning motivation began to find its way into linguistics from 1959. Gardner and Lambert (1959) indicated that second language achievement is related not only to language aptitude but also to motivation. They suggested that language learning motivation can be divided into two types; integrative and instrumental (1972). Towards the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s the research focus turned to differences in motivation between ESL learners (those living within the target language culture) and EFL learners (those studying the target language within their own culture). Throughout the 1990s, research on language learning motivation incorporated concepts from psychology and organizational research, fields with substantial bodies of motivation research. Research on second/foreign language learning motivation in the 1990s also concentrated on seeking explanations for outcomes of specific language tasks and behaviors rather than pursuing general tendencies in social contexts.

Thus, motivation plays a key role in the rate and success of second or foreign language (L2) learning, particularly classroom language learning. Motivation is of great importance in SLA since it provides the primary force to initiate L2 learning

and later the driving force to maintain the long and often dull learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved in SLA somehow relate to motivation. Without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough on their own to ensure student achievement. On the other hand, high motivation can make up for considerable deficiencies both in one's language aptitude and learning conditions.

Since it is theoretically probable that effective use of learning strategies may maintain motivation in language learning (Dornyei & Skehan, 2003), this study will explore the potential relationship between motivation and strategy use. As suggested by Dornyei (2003), examining relationships between motivation and learning behaviors links L2 motivation research more closely with processes in second language acquisition. Although limited, there is already some empirical evidence that supports the link between motivation and learning strategies (Vandergrift, 2005).

The second variable examined in this study was reading proficiency. Another reason to investigate strategy use in language learning has been to determine the relationship between strategies and the level of proficiency, in this case reading proficiency (Cohen & Macaro, 2007). Since the 1990s, reading comprehension has been seen increasingly to be the result of complex interactions between text, setting, reader, readers' background, reading strategies, the L1 and the L2, and reader decision making. From among the variables mentioned above, reading strategy and reading comprehension have been a focus of much attention. Studies of L2 reading strategy use that have proliferated since the late 1970s have generally concluded that readers characterized as both successful and less successful may differ in frequency and variety of strategy use, as well as the ability to draw on a number of strategies in an orchestrated manner (Ikeda and Takeuchi, 2006).

However, to the researcher's knowledge, most studies that have measured reading strategy use and its' relation to reading proficiency in the Iranian context have utilized self-report questionnaires. The present study, however, has utilized a mixed-method design to identify the reading strategies the participants used and also to examine the relationship between strategy use and reading proficiency.

Therefore, this study intends to add insightful findings to previous studies conducted in this field with the advantage of using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and data analysis.

1.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the purposes mentioned above, this study addressed the following research questions.

1. What are the types and frequencies of strategies used by Persian EFL learners while reading expository texts in English?
2. Is there a relationship between Persian EFL learners' strategy use and reading proficiency?
3. Is there a significant difference in strategy use between the good and poor readers? If so, what strategies do good and poor Persian EFL readers use while reading an expository text in English?
4. Is there a relationship between Persian EFL learners' strategy use and motivation towards learning English as a foreign language?

Based on the second, third, and fourth research questions the following null-hypotheses were formulated: