

Can Learning Strategies Predict Language Proficiency? A Case in Iranian EFL Context

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Abstract

The interactions between individuals and their cognitive traits results in language learning. The aim of this article is to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' language learning strategies and their language proficiency. Therefore, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (ILLS) and Michigan English Language Proficiency Test (MELPT) were administered to a group of 63 students studying English language to determine the best predictors of language proficiency regarding the five subscales of the ILLS. Analysis by Pearson product-moment correlation showed significant correlations between cognitive strategies and Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency. Moreover, regression analysis discovered that cognitive strategies could predict language proficiency by explaining 0.59% of the changes in Iranian learners' language proficiency. The educational and scientific consequences and implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, Iranian EFL context, Language proficiency

1. Introduction

The failure of the former teacher oriented approaches to help the learners become independent in the process of learning, led the educationalists shift their attention to the learner in order to gather information and see how the learners' proceed in the process of learning. More specifically the researchers tried to do studies regarding the good language learners. Oxford (1990) discussed importance of learning strategies from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Researchers believed that language learning strategies are behaviors contributing to the development of language system which affects their learning and there are lessons we can learn from good language learners (Oxford 1990 and O'Malley and Chamot 1990).

Therefore, a lot of studies were carried out in many countries to guide the authorities help the students reach a comprehensive level of self-directed language learning. Analysis of Chamot et al (2007) reveals that these studies tried to make learners assume responsibility for applying the strategies autonomously by consciousness improvement of learning strategies, practice prospects, self-evaluation of the role of strategy use and transmission of strategies to new contexts. These researchers tried to discover the learners' learning and use strategies. Since, they believed that educational decisions should be based on professional learners' system. The classification and explanation of learning strategies exploited by the learners and their correlation with other variables were studied by the investigators. This study examined the interaction between Iranian EFL learners learning strategies and their language proficiency.

2. Theoretical Background

Our knowledge about the way learners apply the strategies and the type of strategies they use in their context and situation would help us manage our resources and decision making processes. Hurd and Lewis (2008) maintain that by the way of applying strategy, learners develop a meaningful interaction with their environment. On the other hand, Oxford (2008: 51) believes that successful learners are generally aware of their learning strategies, can evaluate the usefulness of those strategies, and can select strategies properly. Analysis of the investigations indicates that more competent L2 learners try to utilize a broader series of strategies and apply them more frequently than less competent ones (Chamot, 2004, Oxford, 2008).

Investigators should reflect on variables that might influence learner self-determination and the use of these strategies. These variables include not only the geographic region but also social-economic setting, field of study, gender, age, style of learning, objectives, interests, experience and education. Moreover, studies have to tackle not only tendencies but also changes in cultural situations (Oxford, 2008). There are two groups of studies in the area: descriptive and interactive. The former have tried to define: the qualified learner features, the number of strategies used, and comparative studies in strategy use among different groups

The latter have strived to determine the possibility of bringing about change in the application of strategy through the training process (Macaro, 2001). Analyzing learner's role, Graham

(1997) states that learning strategies system developed by the learners influences language learning. Some researches attempted to discover the variety and nature of the strategies employed by professional language learners. Chamot (2004) discovered that more powerful students used learning strategies more frequently, properly, with greater variation, and in a way that they completed the task easily.

More proficient language learners employ many different types of learning strategies (Chamot, 2004). Differences between more and less competent learners have been discovered in the number and series of strategies used, the method of their application in the learning task, and in the accuracy of the strategies for the task in question. In these studies, learners' appreciation of the task's requirements and their power to match a strategy to come upon those qualifications seemed to be a major clarification of professional use of strategies. Moreover, there is a positive relationship between higher levels of language proficiency, less anxiety and more confidence, revealing that affective variables in addition to learning strategies do play a role in their effective functioning. Also, the investigators have focused on the central role of meta-cognitive variables in language learning (Macaro, 2001).

2.1 Iranian Studies

Iranian researchers have carried out a number of studies in the field of language learning strategy. They cover the frequency, variables interaction, and variation. Nikoopour (2011) investigated the strategy use by Iranian EFL learners and found out that meta-cognitive strategies were the most repeatedly used language learning strategies among Iranian EFL learners and memory strategies were the least repeated ones. In their study of the interaction between student variables and strategy use, Sadighi and Zarafshan (2006) determined that the EFL learners used meta-cognitive, social, affective, and compensation strategies more repeatedly than memory and cognitive strategies. Moreover, attitude proved to affect the employment of Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) extensively. That is, the positive attitude influenced the effective use of strategies.

In the study of the correlation between writing strategies, gender and year of study, Abdollahzadeh (2010) came to the conclusion that differences in writing strategy use, gender, and year of study are not significant. Meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies were the most frequently used strategies by all writers, and both the low- and high-level male and female writers used writing strategies with nearly the same frequency. Aliakbari and Hayatzadeh (2010) studied the variation and frequency of language learning strategies (LLS) used by Iranian EFL learners and the possible correlation between the use of LLS and gender. The results indicated that their subjects employed learning strategies at high and medium frequency level, in which meta-cognitive strategies had the highest and memory strategies the lowest rank. Their data also determined the influential role of cognitive strategy as a result of its strongest correlation with other strategies. Also the result revealed that gender did not perform a significant role in the strategy use. In the analysis of the interaction between Language learning strategies and gender, Zare (2010) found out that EFL learners in Iran are medium strategies users and gender played an important part in using language learning strategies and females rose above the males. Therefore, there are some contradictory findings

in these researches.

2.2 Analysis of Strategy Definitions

In the process of describing variations in human cognitive system a number of terminologies are applied by researchers. The most common ones are process, style, and strategy. There has been some confusion and variations in the use of these terms (Brown, 2007). However, they describe different human traits in the processing of information. The term process refers to basic, common, and general characteristics of every human being such as recalling, storing, association, and perceiving. Styles are general characteristics, tendencies, and preferences differentiating people from each other, e.g. traits such as visual and tactile. Strategy refers to specific tendencies and approaches varying within an individual such as behaviors and techniques.

Technically, learning strategies have been defined from different perspectives. Oxford and Ehrman (1988), and Oxford and Crookall (1989) have assumed a general view of the concept. Generally these researchers believe that learning strategies are the steps followed by the learners to facilitate the acquisition, storage and retrieval of information. Moreover, strategies are known as learning techniques, behaviors, or learning to learn, problem solving and study skills and can make learning more professional, easier, faster, valuable, successful and transferable to novel situations. But Oxford (1990, 2008) has approached the concept from a more language learning specific point of view and holds that these strategies are the special procedures students use to expand their progress in perceiving, internalizing and using L2. More specifically strategies are instruments for active and independent contribution which is necessary for expanding communicative capability. Learning strategies are the methods through which learners acquire a broad series of topics. In the analysis of these researchers' views we come to the conclusion that their model of strategy consists of a process involving steps, procedures, skills and tools represented by figure 1:

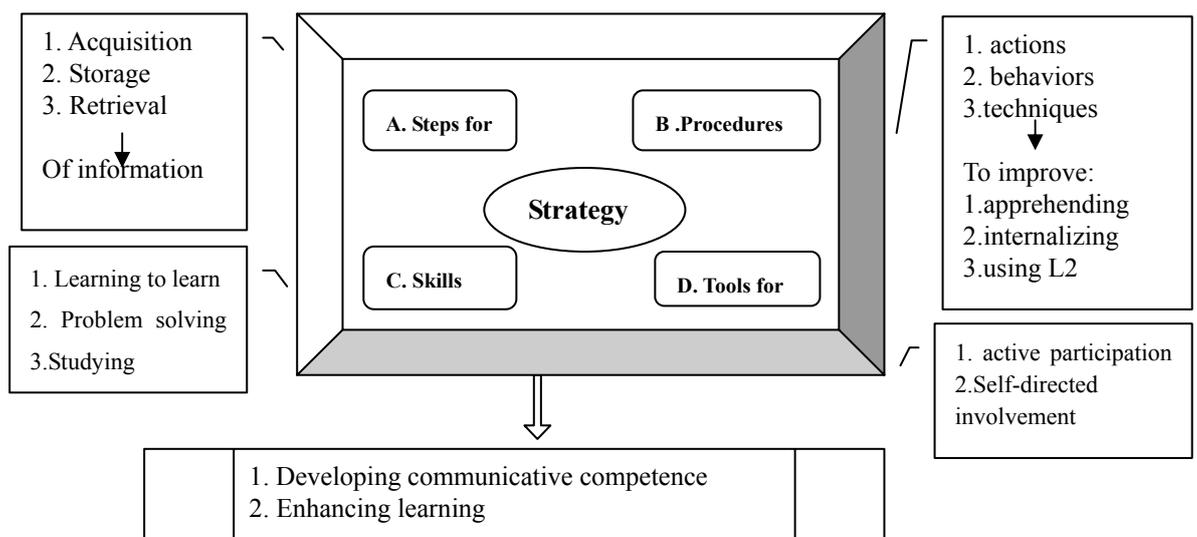


Figure 1. represents the process of strategy

And in the analysis of Brown (2007), we encounter a triangular model made up of plans, techniques and attacks represented in figure 2:

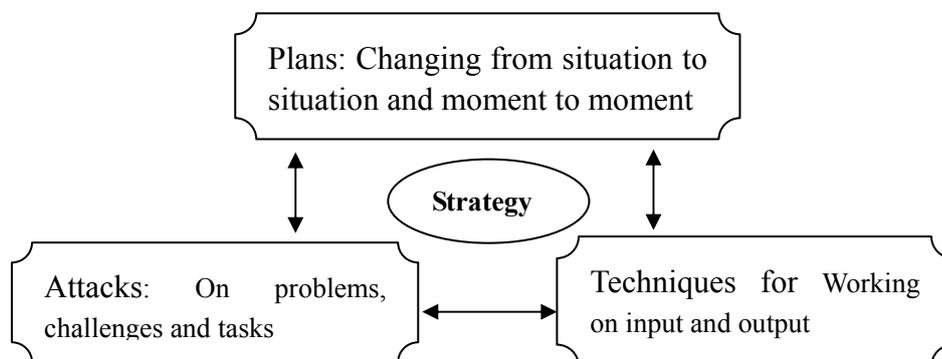


Figure 2. represents the triangular model of strategy

Analysis of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) shows that strategies are processes involving techniques, approaches, thoughts and premeditated actions which are conscious and data driven that students follow in order to assist the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information that individuals use to accomplish a learning goal or facilitate a learning task (Chamot 1987, 2004, 2005). Figure 3 illustrates this conception of strategy:

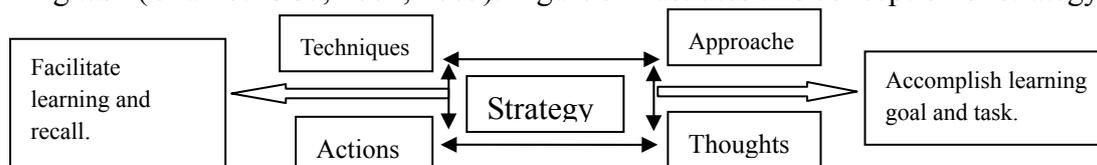


Figure 3. portraying O'Malley and Chamot's model of strategy

Assuming autonomy as the outcome for the learners, Griffiths (2008, 87) states that strategies are the actions intentionally preferred by students for the goal of controlling their own language learning. Cohen (2003, 2007) maintains that strategies are deliberate thoughts and behaviors applied by learners with the objective of improving knowledge and comprehension of target language by supporting successful and professional accomplishment of language learning and allowing language learners to develop their own individualized approach to learning and using the language and relating their method to specific tasks. In another study, he holds that strategies are the moves constituting the steps and actions purposefully chosen by learners for learning second language, its use, or both. They establish the organization of learning, rehearsing and bolstering cognitive traits (Cohen, 1998: 5). Figure 4 shows his model:

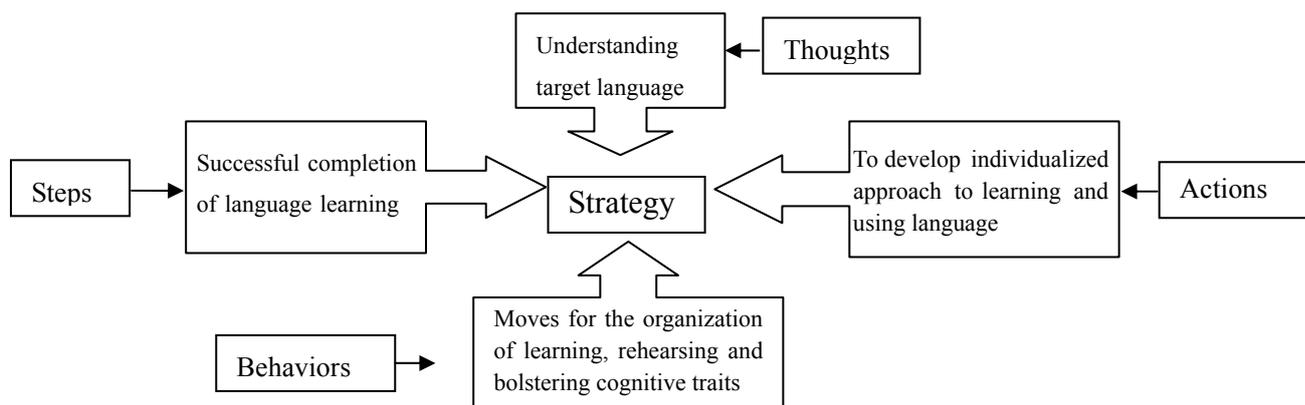


Figure 4. illustrating O'Malley and Chamot's model of strategy

3. Purpose of the Study

As pointed out before, some investigations had explored the relationship between language learning strategies and different learner constructs. To the investigator's best knowledge, however, no research conducted so far to investigate the predictive role of Iranian EFL students' language learning strategies in their language proficiency. Thus, the present study tries to investigate the impact of language learning strategies subscales on language proficiency considering Iranian EFL students. This research, therefore, is carried out to provide answers for these questions:

Q1: Do language learning strategies influence EFL learners' language proficiency?

Q2: Which subscales of language learning strategies can predict students' language proficiency?

4. Method

4.1 Subjects

The subjects for the research were selected randomly among the third year students majoring in English at the ELT department of Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran. They include 63 male (33.3%) and female (66.6%) students majoring in English translation and English literature. Their ages ranged between 22 and 24

4.2 Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to collect the data: SILL (Strategies Inventory of Language Learning) by Rebecca Oxford (1990) and MELPT (Michigan English Language Proficiency Test).

4.2.1 Strategies Inventory of Language Learning (SILL)

This questionnaire was designed to measure the EFL learners' language learning strategies. It consists of six subscales: memory strategies (9 items), cognitive strategies (14 items), compensation strategies (6 items), metacognitive strategies (9 items), affective strategies (6

items), and social strategies (6 items), all together consisting of 50 items.

4.2.2 Michigan English Language Proficiency Test (MELPT)

This test includes three parts: English Grammar (40 items), Vocabulary (40 items), and Reading comprehension (20 items), all together consisting of 100 items.

4.3 Procedures

The above mentioned instruments were distributed to the students. The data gathered from the two questionnaires were analyzed and processed by SPSS version 16. For discovering the internal consistency of the SILL and the MELPT, the Cronbach Alpha reliability estimate was applied. Descriptive statistics was employed to explain the data. To study the impact of subjects' language learning strategies on their language proficiency, Pearson product-moment correlation was applied to the data. Moreover, we used the Multiple Regression Analysis with a stepwise method to find out the best forecaster of language proficiency in connection with language learning strategies subscales.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

To study the nature of the distribution, descriptive statistics was applied. Table 1 sums up the descriptive results of the two instruments: The SILL and the MELPT. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics regarding the Strategies Inventory of Language Learning questionnaire (SILL). As it is shown, the total SILL has a high reliability, i.e., .75, as does the language proficiency score, i.e., .74. So the instruments are reliable and coefficient.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of SILL subscales and Language Proficiency (Michigan Test)

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning	N	# of items	Mean	SD	Alpha
<i>Memory Strategies</i>	63	9	3.06	0.67	.79
<i>Cognitive Strategies</i>	63	14	3.40	0.58	.72
<i>Compensation Strategies</i>	63	6	3.46	0.71	.79
<i>Meta-cognitive Strategies</i>	63	9	3.37	0.81	.75
<i>Affective Strategies</i>	63	6	2.80	0.74	.87
<i>Social Strategies</i>	63	6	3.12	0.78	.69
<i>Total SILL</i>	63	50	2.90	0.47	.75
<i>Michigan</i>	63	100	72.65	13.06	.74

5.2 The Results of Correlation between Students' Scores on SILL Subscales and Their Language Proficiency

To study the existence of substantial correlation between learners' language learning strategies and their language proficiency, Pearson product-moment correlation was employed. The results indicated that there is a significant correlation between learners' language proficiency and their cognitive strategies ($r = 0.272$, $p < 0.01$). But the correlation between compensation strategies ($r=0.126$), memory strategies ($r=0.071$), and meta-cognitive strategies ($r=0.161$), affective strategies ($r=0.042$), and social strategies ($r=0.071$) is not significant (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between Strategy Inventory for Language Learning and Language Proficiency

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning	Language Proficiency
<i>Memory Strategies</i>	0.071
<i>Cognitive Strategies</i>	0.272*
<i>Compensation Strategies</i>	0.126
<i>Meta-cognitive Strategies</i>	0.161
<i>Affective Strategies</i>	0.042
<i>Social Strategies</i>	0.071
<i>Total SILL</i>	0.198

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5.3 Prediction of Language Proficiency by SILL Subscales

Table (3) presents the results for learners' language proficiency regressed on the variables of interest in this study (SILL subscales). The results reveal which variables are important in predicting higher language learning strategies on the part of learners. Language learning strategies explained .059% of the total variance, (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.059$, $p < .05$) using cognitive strategies. High score on cognitive strategies was the best predictor of high score on the language proficiency test.

Table 3. Regression analysis for strategy inventory for language learning and Language Proficiency (Michigan)

Predictor	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	P	B
<i>Language Proficiency</i>						
<i>Cognitive Strategies</i>	0.272	0.074	0.059	90.000	0.00	5.629

6. Discussion

The results of the current study confirmed the importance of the language learning strategies. As shown in Table 2, language proficiency is significantly and positively correlated with the SILL subscale of cognitive strategies. The findings reveal the governing role of cognitive strategies in language proficiency, which is in line with Hashemi (2011) result that adapted use of these strategies is related to language proficiency. Conducting the regression analysis, however, the researchers discovered that this subscale of the SILL was best predictive of higher language proficiency scores. According to Oxford (1990) cognitive strategies are popular strategies with language learners. By the application of these strategies, the target language is controlled or transformed by repeating, analyzing or summarizing. The items in this group try to tap practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating composition for input and output. Moreover, practicing is the most important variable which can be accomplished by repeating, working with sounds and writing, and using patterns. The strategies of receiving and sending messages are used when learners try to find the main idea through skimming and scanning. Language learners do not need to check every word and adult learners commonly use analyzing and reasoning strategies. These devices are used to understand the meaning, expression of the target language and also to make new expressions. So the data shows that learners with better repeating, analyzing or summarizing skill, good command of receiving and sending messages, reasoning, and structure creating capability, tend to be or become proficient language users.

In this study, highest scores are attributed to the effect of cognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies are among the subscales of direct language learning strategies, which deal with direct learning and use of a new language. These strategies were related to the highest scores in language proficiency. Firstly, this finding shows that the learners' with higher capability in repetition, analysis and summarization, are well-equipped with enough potential for learning or using EFL. And secondly, those EFL students who enjoy higher levels of practicing the structure and lexis, receiving and sending messages through negotiations, or have social relations, connecting them to other people, own higher amount of talk with natives regarding social issues, possess the higher and better desire to get involved in activities designed to improve their competence and performance in EFL. Also, these cognitively oriented strategy-user EFL learners who are more competent in analysis and reasoning, and are creative in manipulating sounds and writing, and using patterns, are more qualified or will be able to fulfill the requirements of language learning or use more professionally. And finally the data reveals that learners who skim and scan well, express greater tendency to learn and use language more appropriately.

Since analysis of the data revealed a significant correlation between one of the subscales of language learning and use strategies, i.e., cognitive strategies and language proficiency, then regarding the EFL education, it is suggested that discursal techniques and socio-cultural variables of analysis, reasoning, and creativity, to be included in a variety of materials and the classroom context should encourage different types of these socio-cultural experiences. Teachers, authorities, curriculum designers are also recommended to have a better understanding of learners' cognitive strategies, backgrounds within family and cognitive

variables and variations in the community whereby they can help weaker learners in learning and using language. Moreover, in such an environment, learners could further engage themselves in group-work activities in the application of cognitive traits and regard themselves as active contributors to classroom procedures and activities. In other words, in such an instructional setting, learners' and teachers' negotiations regarding the cognitive aspects of human linguistic and communicative competence, are crucial to the development of rich and powerful language use context.

7. Conclusion

For some authorities in the field of TEFL, it might appear difficult to bolster students' cognitive strategies. On the other hand, as previous researchers such as Mochizuki (1999) and Park (1997) have shown that cognitive strategies were predictors of students' proficiency and played a crucial role in the improvement of learners' language proficiency; therefore, not paying enough attention to the processes of analyzing and reasoning, used for forming and revising internal mental modes useful for receiving and producing messages in the target language, in turn, may result in EFL students' failure to gain advantage in educational accomplishment. Other researchers are thus suggested to find other ways of discovering why some learners learn and use language better than others. The present study played a part in filling this gap by investigating the role of language learning strategies, in the Iranian EFL contexts, in the development of language proficiency; but it does not give us a thorough argument of learners' perception of how language proficiency can be developed. Other inquiries are needed to study other factors that can help teachers, course designers, curriculum developers, and material writers review and expand their procedures and undertakings in the process of EFL educational situation and context.

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