The Use and Ranking of Different English Language Learning Strategies by English Major Iranian Female University Level Learners

Seyed Hossein Fazeli, M.A.

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Abstract

This study aims to rank types of English language learning strategies that are used by Iranian female university level learners of English language as a university major. The results show that except the Metacognitive Strategies category, the mean score for each of the five categories fell in the range of medium strategy use.

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Key terms: English Language Learning Strategies, English Learning, Female Learners of English

1. Introduction

In the last three decades or so, an important shift has taken place in the field of second/foreign language learning, and researchers have focused mainly on learner's individual factors. It might be appropriate to refer to Wenden (1985) who reminds us a proverb which states "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime". This proverb tells us that if learners are taught strategies of language learning to work out, they will be empowered to manage their own learning. In this way Ellis (1985) also claims that native language speakers use the same strategy types as learners of second/foreign language use. In addition, Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinnary and Rubbins (1999) point out that "Differences between more effective learners and less effective learners were found in the number and range of strategies used" (p.166). Therefore, the importance of encouraging using Language Learning Strategies (LLs) is undeniable. Moreover, even researchers (e.g. Oxford, 1990; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989) support the belief that learners who receive learner training, generally learn better than those who do not. The researcher aims to investigate regarding English Language Learning Strategies (ELLSs) among the students of English as university major to

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find how much the university students of English use such strategies. The reason that why the research focuses on female only, to avoid the influence of gender on type of research (Ehraman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

2. Review of the Literature

As Oxford (1990) points out how Language Learning Strategies(LLSs) are important in both theoretical and practical aspects of language learning for language learners; since the publication of seminal works "What good learners can teach us" (Rubin, 1975) and "What can we learn from good learners" (Stern, 1975), there have done much valuable works in the field of LLSs . In such case, building on the previous work, the investigator aims to add earlier research.

To our knowledge, a review of the relevant literature considering LLSs shows after decades of research in the related field, LLSs have received considerable attention in the literature. The researchers came to conclusion that vast number of strategies has been reported to be used by language learners (Cohen,1990) through various used methods such as survey tools and written questionnaire (Gu & Johnson,1996; Fan,2003), interview (Gu,2003; Parks & Raymond,2004), think-aloud or verbal reports (Goh,1998; Nassaji,2003), diaries or dialogue journal (Carson & Longhini,2002), recollective narratives (Oxford, Lavine, Felkins,

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Hollaway & Saleh, 1996). Such measurements are used in the single form of method (separately) or as component methods (single set of methods) based on nature and goals of research works.

Related literature of LLSs includes explanations of some interesting patterns regarding LLSs, such as Marti'nez (1996) argues some features of LLSs which are inferred from the literature: a)They play important role to facilitate language learning; b)Learners may use LLSs as problem-solving mechanisms to deal with the process of second/foreign language learning.

Since 1975s, dozens of studies have contributed to our understanding of strategies used by ESL (English as a Second Language)/EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners at the level of adults. Such studies show that in order to affect changes in perceptions of learners' role in learning process, we need to discover more about what learners do to learn successfully. Moreover, such studies show that the best way of going about teaching strategies remain a subject of much debate right up to the present (Brown, 2001) because of use of LLSs is influenced by number of factors (Oxford, 1990), and the frequency and variety of LLSs vary among different individuals and depend on a number of variables (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). In addition, research shows that students differ considerably in the use of LLSs (O'Malley & Chamot,

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1990; Oxford & Cohen, 1992). Although attitudes, sex, ethnicity, and the other factors have received lesser emphasis in the recent studies of LLSs (Oxford & Cohen, 1992).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The sample drawn from the population must be representative so as to allow the researchers to make inferences or generalization from sample statistics to population (Maleske, 1995). A total of two hundred and thirteen Iranian female university level learners of English language as a university major at the Islamic Azad University Branches of three cities which named Abadan, Dezful, and Masjed-Solyman in Khuzestan province in south of Iran, were asked to participate in this research work. The intact classes that were chosen.

The chosen participants for this study were female students studying in third grade (year) of English major of B.A. degree, ranging in age from 19 to 28(Mean= 23.4, SD= 2).Their mother tongue was Persian (Farsi) which is the official language of Iran, according to Act 15 of the Iranian constitution.

3.2 Instrumentation in the Current Study

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Three instruments were used to gather data in the current study. They were:

3.2.1 Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning(SILL) of Rebecca L. Oxford (1990) is a kind of self-report questionnaire that has been used extensively by researchers in many countries, and its reliability has been checked in multiple ways, and has been reported as high validity, reliability and utility(Oxford, 1996). In addition, factor analysis of SILL is confirmed by many studies (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Oxford, 1996; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).In this way, as Ellis (1994) believes Oxford's taxonomy is possibly the most comprehensive currently available. Several empirical studies have been found moderate intercorrelation between the items of six categories in SILL (Oxford & Ehrman, 1995).

The SILL includes 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).

The original inventory includes 50 items, but the adapted version includes 49 items which adapted for the current study. In adapted version of SILL, one item was taken out. The item was deleted based on the feedback from participants in the pilot study. Revision in part of Cognitive

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Strategies includes deletion of item number 22 "I try not to translate word for word".

3.2.2 Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

Because of the nature of this work (regarding the use of English LLSs), TOEFL(Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension parts) as a general English proficiency test was used for determining the proficiency level of participants in English in order to minimize the effect of English language proficiency. The participant whom were classified as intermediate subjects, were asked to participate in the current study.

3.2.3 A Background Questionnaire

The socio-economic status of participants, such as the participants' social background, and parents' level education was controlled as well by a background questionnaire. The middle class students were chosen.

3.3 Pilot Study

The sample for the pilot study was selected so as it represents the entire sample for participants whom asked to participate in the main study. Since sample size in pilot study ranges from 20 to bigger of 65 (Hinkin,1998), thirty nine female students university level learners of English language as a university major at Islamic Azad University

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Branches of three cities, namely, Abadan, Dezful, and Masjed-Solyman were asked to participate in the pilot study.

3.4 Reliability of the Instruments

Since Cronbach's alpha is one of the standard ways of expressing a test's reliability (Foster, 1998); and its coefficient is commonly used to describe the reliability factors of multi-point formatted questionnaires or scales; in such way, the reliabilities of our experimental measures were assessed by calculating Cronbach's alpha over the items of the two instruments across all the participants in the current study which were found .89 for SILL, and .80 for TOEFL. The reliability coefficient indicated the degree to which the results on a scale can be considered internally consistent, or reliable (De Vellis, 2003; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Such finding of reliabilities for the two instruments confirms the finding of reliabilities in the pilot study.

3.5 Method of Data Collection

The study was done at each branch of the Islamic Azad University in two stages (in two sessions during two weeks). Before the study commenced, all the participants were informed of the objectives of the study. The participants were given TOEFL in the first stage (the first session in the first week), then the adapted version of SILL alongside

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Background Questionnaire in the second stage (the second session in the following week).

3.6 Data Analysis

After data collection, the data was entered onto databases (Excel and SPSS) to enable data analysis to be carried out.

4. Results and Discussion

The means were calculated in order to determine the reported frequency of strategy use among the total group of the respondents (N=213). In reporting the frequency use of LLSs, Oxford's key (1990) was used to understand mean scores on SILL in the current study:

In the entire sample, except the Metacognitive Strategies category, the mean score for each of the five categories fell in the range of medium strategy use. The strategies in the Metacognitive category were the most frequently used, with a mean of 3.7 (SD=.64). The mean use of strategies in the other five categories were 3.2 (SD=.63) for Compensation Strategies, 3.1 (SD=.69) for Affective Strategies, 3.1 (SD=.79) for Social

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Strategies, 3.0 (SD=.59) for Memory Strategies, and 3.0 (SD=.52) for Cognitive Strategies. Mean of the overall strategy use was 3.2 (SD=.45), which categorized as a medium level. Except the Metacognitive category, there was not much difference in the mean scores of strategy use among the other five categories.

The researcher identified the High frequently used strategy items in the current study that were included from sixteen strategy items. The strategies covered strategies from the six categories. The numbers of strategy items were six strategy items from the Metacognitive Strategies category, three strategy items from the Cognitive Strategies category, two strategy items from the Affective Strategies category, two strategy items from the Compensation Strategies category, two strategy items from the Memory Strategies category, and one strategy item from the Social Strategies category. The most interesting finding was that from the sixteen High frequently used strategy items, six of them were from the Metacognitive Strategies category, and the maximum mean in this level of use belonged to the Metacognitive Strategies category.

The researcher identified the Medium frequently used strategy items in the current study that were included from thirty strategy items. The strategies covered strategies from the six categories. The numbers of strategy items were nine strategy items from the Cognitive Strategies

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category, seven strategy items from the Memory Strategies category, five strategy items from the Social Strategies category, three strategy items from the Affective Strategies category, three strategy items from the Compensation Strategies category, and three strategy items from the Metacognitive Strategies category. The most interesting finding was that from thirty Medium frequently used strategy items, nine of them were from the Cognitive Strategies category, and the maximum means in this level of use belonged to the Cognitive, Affective, and Metacognitive Strategies categories.

The researcher identified the Low frequently used strategy items in the current study that were included from three strategy items. The strategies covered strategies from three categories. The numbers of strategy items were one strategy item from the Compensation Strategies category, one strategy item from the Cognitive Strategies category, and one strategy item from the Affective Strategies category. The minimum mean in this level of use belonged to the Affective Strategies category.

5. Limitations of the Current Study

Generally speaking, there are some difficulties inherent in endeavor to conduct any research work on the learners of a second/foreign language. Similarly, the present study due to using Ex Post facto type of

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research has certain limitations that must be taken in mind which interpretation of the results.

Moreover, since all the education quasi-research deals with living human beings occur out of laboratory conditions have limitations (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). Like any study, the current study has a number of limitations. The limitations in this study include limitations that are related to questionnaires, English proficiency test, statistical method, large of sample, type of research, comprehensive operational definitions, environment, and culture.

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