

Utilization of Language Learning Strategies by Iranian Post Graduate Students and Their Attitude and Motivation Toward English Learning

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Abstract

The current study tries to explore language learning strategies (LLSs) of Iranian postgraduate learners and the effect of motivation and attitude on their strategy use. Oxford's classification of language learning strategies is the framework of the current study. Her strategy taxonomy includes six categories as memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, social and affective strategies. 156 Iranian post graduate students in Kerman province were selected according to two-step cluster sampling. Then, translated version of Oxford's strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) was administered to the participants to determine their strategy use. Attitude/motivation test battery (AMTB) was also used to identify the participants' type of attitude and motivation. After collecting and analyzing data, the following results were found: a) Unlike the findings of the majorities of the studies done so far on foreign language learners, Iranian post graduate students of art and science were found to be high strategy users; b) The participants reported the use of compensation, social, metacognitive, and affective strategies in a high level while memory and cognitive strategies were reported to be used at a medium level; c) No significant difference was found between overall strategy use of students with positive and negative attitude; d) No significant difference was found between overall strategy use of students with integrative and instrumental motivation; e) No significant difference was

found between overall strategy use of students of art and science.

Key words: Language learning strategies; Iranian post graduate students; Learning attitude; Motivation; English learning

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INTRODUCTION

Since the late 60's and early 70's, there has been a significant shift within the field of language learning and teaching with greater emphasis on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching (Chamot, 2001; Grenfell and Macaro, 2008). In this view, the learners are no longer passive and are viewed as the active participants in the teaching-learning act. It seems a reasonable goal for language teachers to make their students become less dependent on the teachers and reach a level of autonomy (O'Malley and Chamot, 1995). Learners need to keep on learning even if the formal classroom setting is not available. Learner autonomy is in line with current views about the active involvement of learners, popularity of learner-centered approaches, and learners' independence of teachers (Littlewood, 1996). As a result of increased attention to the learner and learner-centered approaches, much emphasis has been laid on the learner's active cognitive processes referred to as learning strategies which have been recognized as a key component of an autonomous approach to language learning and teaching (Littlewood, 1999). In much of the literature

concerned with the development of learner autonomy, a lot of importance has been attached to the training of the learners in terms of strategy development and learning skills (O'Malley and Chamot, 1995; Oxford, 1990).

In parallel with this new shift of interest, how learning strategies influence the success of language learners has been the primary concern of researchers. Rubin and Thompson (1994) state that the main underlying assumption behind learning strategies research in foreign language education is concerned with the idea that one of the factors that make "good" learners good is their use of learning strategies.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study intends to investigate the use of language learning strategies by Iranian post graduate university students and its relation to the factors of motivation, attitude and field of study. Specifically, the objectives of the current study can briefly be stated as: a) To identify the overall degree of strategy use by Iranian post graduate students; b) To identify the most and least frequently used strategies by Iranian post-graduate students; c) To identify differences between Iranian post-graduate students with positive attitudes and those with negative attitudes regarding their strategy use; d) To identify differences between integratively-motivated and instrumentally-motivated Iranian post-graduate students concerning their strategy choice; e) To identify differences in strategy use between Iranian post-graduate students of different fields of study.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Since 1975, various theorists have contributed to the definition of language learning strategies (Grenfell & Macaro, 2008). Language learning strategies as determinant factors in the facilitation of learning a new language have been defined in different ways. Strategies are "the thoughts and actions that learners use to accomplish a learning goal" (Chamot, 2004: 14). Cohen (1998) broadly defines second language learner strategies as encompassing both second language learning and second language use strategies. In his terms, language learning and language use strategies are:

"those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about that language". (p. 7)

Richards, Platt, and Platt (1996:209) define language learning strategies as: "intentional behavior and thoughts that learners make use of during learning in order to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information" (p.209). Cohen (2007) proposes to define language learner strategies as conscious mental activity

that must contain not only an action but a goal (or an intention) and a learning situation. He further states that whereas a mental action might be subconscious, an action with a goal/intention and related to a learning situation can only be conscious. Here in this study, the definition of LSS is adopted from Oxford (1994) as "... specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use-often consciously - to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2."

Oxford's classification as the framework of the current study will be explained in more detail. Oxford (1997; 2001) defines language learning strategies 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" (p. 8). Her strategy taxonomy includes six categories: (a) *memory strategies*; (b) *cognitive strategies*; (c) *metacognitive strategies*; (d) *compensation strategies*; (e) *social strategies*; and (f) *affective strategies*. *Memory strategies* help learners store and retrieve new information. Specific examples include remembering new words by creating mental linkages and making associations between what is known and what is new. *Cognitive strategies* facilitate the understanding and production of new language. English language learners, for instance, may practice the sounds of English or they could infer the meaning of a new English word by segmenting it into known roots, prefixes, and suffixes. *Compensation strategies* allow learners to bridge over large knowledge gaps to make meaning. Examples include using circumlocution and making guesses. *Metacognitive strategies*, *social strategies*, and *affective strategies*, on the other hand, help regulate the learning process and learners' emotional responses. *Metacognitive strategies* are used by the learner to coordinate the learning process, such as planning and evaluating their own learning. *Affective strategies* help the learner to regulate their emotions, motivations, and attitudes. Examples include anxiety reduction and self-encouragement. *Social strategies* facilitate learning through learner interaction with others. Learners, for instance, may form study groups to learn a new language or seek help from proficient users of that language.

Attitudes as an Affective Factor

A major area of foreign language learning research is the role played by affective variables in the process of learning. Among the affective factors influencing the success of students in learning a language, attitude is a determinant one. There are several reasons why research on students' attitudes toward language learning is important. First, attitudes toward learning are believed to influence behaviors such as selecting and reading books, speaking in a foreign language. Second, a relationship between attitudes and language performance has been shown to exist. (Chou, 2002; Espinosa, 2007).

Motivation as an Affective Factor

As one of the main determinants of foreign language learning achievement, motivation has attracted the attention of many investigators. Different definitions of motivation have been posited by researchers. Motivation theories endeavor to “answer questions about what gets individuals moving and toward what activities or tasks” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). In second language learning, motivation provides “the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process” (Dornyei, 2005, p.65). Further, “all the other factors involved in second language acquisition presuppose motivation to some extent” (Dornyei, 2005, p.65). Gardner’s social psychological model of second language motivation distinguishes between two motivational orientations: integrative versus instrumental orientation, a distinction highly acclaimed among second language researchers and practitioners (Dornyei, 2005).

Integrative orientation reflects a positive attitude toward the second language group and the desire to interact and identify with the second language community. On the other hand, learners with an integrative orientation are interested in the culture of the target language; they want to acquaint themselves with the target community and become an integral part of it. Instrumental orientation relates to the potential practicality of second language proficiency, such as employment and international travel. Thus, learners with an instrumental motivation view the foreign language as a means of finding a good job; in other words, the target language acts as a monetary motive (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993).

Field of Specialization

Field of specialization is among the factors which may influence the students’ strategy choice (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). Different researches reported the effect of field of specialization on students’ strategy use as Gu (2002) and Yin (2008). In the present study, the effect of the post-graduate courses which are offered in the location of the study (Kerman Province) will be investigated. Courses will be divided into two categories as courses of science and art. Thus, it will be investigated if there is any difference between science and art students toward their strategy use in English learning.

METHOD

Participants

156 Iranian post graduate students majoring in art and science were selected for the present study based on two-step cluster sampling. All participants were in the second semester of their studies in Kerman Bahonar University

and RafsanjanValiasr University.

Instruments

The first instrument which was used in this study is original Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2001). The SILL was chosen for use in this study because it was designed specifically for assessing foreign language learning strategies and it provides a comprehensive, systematic inventory of language learning strategies (Lu, 2007). In addition the SILL has been used in many language learning strategy studies (Brown, Robson, and Rosenkjar, 2001; Griffiths, 2003; Hsiao and Oxford, 2003). It is a 50-item version for learners of English as a foreign language. The second instrument for collecting data will be Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) which is a Likert-type scale with 59 statements. The AMTB was chosen for use in this study because it was designed specifically for assessing foreign language learning motivations (Lu, 2007) and it has been used in many learning motivation studies (Brown, Robson, and Rosenkjar, 2001; Masgoret, Bernaus, and Gardner, 2001; Rueda and Chen, 2005).

Procedure

Both questionnaires were administered in one session which last for an hour. The researcher explained for the students that they will not be judged based on their answers and it will not affect their grade. Any question was answered by the researcher to make it crystal clear for the respondents. The collected data were processed through the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.

To analyze data, first, the total strategy mean scores of the students as well as that of each strategy category were calculated by adding up the chosen frequencies of its items and dividing the obtained sum by the number of the items in that strategy group. To determine the motivation and attitude means scores of the students, the mean score for instrumental and integrative motivation as well as the means scores for positive and negative attitude of the students were calculated. The strongest mean score showed the type of attitude and motivation of the participants in the current study. Finally, the gathered data were subjected to descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and independent sample t-test to find the answer for research questions.

RESULTS

Data analysis (table 1) revealed the overall mean score of 3.67 for Iranian post-graduate students’ strategy use. Mean score of 3.5 and above shows high use of strategies. Thus, it can be concluded that Iranian post graduates are high strategy users.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics Related to the Strategy Questionnaire

Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Frequency
3.67	0.39151	2.77	4.54	High

To find the most and least frequently used strategies, the mean score for each group of strategies was calculated as it appears in the following table.

Table 2
Rank Order of the Favored Strategies

Strategies	Mean	Rank	Frequency
Metacognitive	4.08	1	High
Affective	4.01	2	High
Compensation	3.67	3	High
Social	3.55	4	High
Cognitive	3.44	5	Medium
Memory	3.22	6	Medium

Table 3
Mean Strategy Scores for Positive/Negative Attitude of the Participants

Strategy Attitude	Mem.	Cog.	Meta.	Aff.	Soc.	Comp.	Total
Positive attitude	3.22	3.46	4.08	4.08	3.56	3.69	3.68
Negative attitude	3.05	3.00	4.00	4.00	3.16	2.90	3.35

Note: Mem= Memory, Cog= Cognitive, Meta= Metacognitive, Aff= Affective, Soc= Social, Comp= Compensation

As the total strategy mean scores show, students with positive attitude used strategies more frequently. Looking at the strategy means of each category of strategies reveals the same result. Students with positive attitude used all categories of strategies more frequently than students with negative attitude. No strategy category was found to be used more frequently by students with negative attitude. In order to see if the differences among these mean strategy scores are significant, t-values were obtained as shown in table 4.

Table 4
T-Values for the Differences Between Positive and Negative Attitude Mean Scores on the Strategy Questionnaire

Comparison	d.f.	t-value	Significance
Memory	156	0.521	0.604
Cognitive	156	1.243	0.218
Compensation	156	1.873	0.065
Affective	156	0.253	0.801
Social	156	0.710	0.480
Metacognitive	156	0.253	0.801
Total	156	1.190	0.238

According to the table 2, metacognitive strategy was found to be the most frequently used strategy (M= 4.8) and memory strategy was found as the least frequently used strategy (M= 3.22), affective, compensation, social, and cognitive strategies stood between the most and least frequently strategies respectively. Moreover, the table shows that Iranian post-graduate students use metacognitive, affective, compensation and social strategies at a high level of frequency while cognitive and memory strategies were found to be used at a medium level of frequency.

To examine the effect of attitude on the choice of language learning strategies, an analysis was done for positive and negative attitude. Table 4 summarizes the mean strategy scores for each group of participants with positive and negative attitude.

Table 4 displays that the differences between the mean strategy scores for students with negative attitude and for those with positive attitude were not found to be statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ level. To calculate the influence of motivation on the choice of language learning strategies, an analysis was done for instrumentally and integrative motivation. First, mean strategy score for instrumentally-motivated and integratively-motivated students were calculated and reflected in the following table.

Table 5
Mean Strategy Scores for Instrumental/Integrative Motivation of the Participants

Strategy Motivation	Mem.	Cog.	Comp	Aff.	Soc	Meta	Total
Instrumental	3.25	3.40	3.66	4.07	3.52	4.07	3.66
Integrative	3.17	3.51	3.67	4.10	3.60	4.10	3.69

Note: Mem= Memory, Cog= Cognitive, Meta= Metacognitive, Aff= Affective, Soc= Social, Comp= Compensation

According to the total strategy mean scores in table 5, integratively-motivated students used strategies more frequently than instrumentally-motivated student. Moreover, all categories of strategies except memory strategies were used more frequently by integratively-motivated students in comparison with instrumentally-motivated students. To investigate if the differences among these mean scores are significant, independent sample t-test was conducted and the following t-values table was obtained.

Table 6
T-values for the Difference Between Instrumental and Integrative Mean Scores on the Strategy Questionnaire

Comparisons	d.f.	t-value	Significance
Memory	156	0.672*	0.032
Cognitive	156	0.838*	0.011
Compensation	156	0.032	0.975
Affective	156	0.295	0.769
Social	156	0.425	0.672
Metacognitive	156	0.295	0.769
Total	156	0.317	0.752

Table 7
Mean Strategy Scores for Students of Art and Science

Strategy Major	Mem.	Cog.	Meta.	Aff.	Soc.	Comp.	Total
Art	3.20	3.47	4.13	4.13	3.56	3.72	3.70
Science	3.24	3.41	4.01	4.01	3.53	3.60	3.63

Note: Mem= Memory, Cog= Cognitive, Meta= Metacognitive, Aff= Affective, Soc= Social, Comp= Compensation

The total strategy mean scores report that students of art (M= 3.70) used strategies more frequently than students of science (M= 3.63). The only strategy category which was used more frequently by students of science was memory strategies. Other strategy categories were used more frequently by students of art. To see if the differences among the strategy means were statistically significant, an independent sample t-test was carried out. The related finding is reported in table 8 below.

Table 8
T-values for the Difference Between Students of Art and Science Mean Score on the Strategy Questionnaire

Comparison	d.f.	t-value	Significance
Memory	156	- 0.349	0.728
Cognitive	156	0.546*	0.002
Compensation	156	0.810	0.421
Affective	156	1.092	0.279
Social	156	0.168	0.867
Metacognitive	156	1.092	0.279
Total	156	0.734	0.465

Table 6 shows that the only two statistically significant differences obtained were for memory (t-value= 0.672, p= 0.03) and cognitive (t-value= 0.838, p= 0.01) strategies. It indicates that integratively-motivated students significantly used cognitive strategies more frequently than instrumentally-motivated ones while memory strategies were significantly used more frequently by instrumentally-motivated students. To identify differences between students of art and science on the choice of strategy use, strategy mean score for each strategy category and that of total strategy use was calculated. Table 8 summarizes the mean strategy scores for students of art and science.

Table 8 displays that the only statistically significant difference obtained was for cognitive (t-value= 0.546, p= 0.002) strategy. It indicated that students of art significantly used cognitive strategy more frequently than students of science.

DISCUSSION

According to table 1 and 2, the participants in the current study reported to be high strategy users (3.67). This finding is not congruent with most of the studies done on language learning strategies of Iranians or Asian EFL students (Zarafshan, 2002; Sedaghat, 2001; Mokhtari, 2007; Hong, 2006). These studies mostly found the learners as medium strategy users. The results of this study may be due to the level of education of Iranian postgraduate EFL learners. As Kafipour (2006) compares the undergraduate and post-graduate education in Iran, undergraduate education system in Iran is teacher-

centered in which teacher is the person who lectures, presents and instructs the learning materials. The students should just listen and take note and memorize what the teachers instruct in the classroom. In such situation, the students remain passive without any role in the learning and teaching process. However, the situation in postgraduate education system is completely different and student-centered. The students are required to actively participate in learning and teaching process by presenting lectures, holding conferences and discussion forums. The teachers act as a leader and organizer. This learning approach forces the students to be more autonomous and teacher-independent in learning. As Oxford (2001) states language learning strategies are one of the most important factors which help students to become independent in their learning. This may be the reason why postgraduate students in the current study used language learning strategies at a high level of frequency.

Iranian post-graduate students reported to utilize metacognitive strategies most and memory strategies least frequently. Metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the learning process and evaluating how well one has learned (Oxford, 2001). The reason for more frequent use of these strategies can be the EFL context of learning English in Iran. Metacognitive strategies provide control over the learning process and because EFL students are more conscious about their foreign language development, they apply those strategies which help them to have control over their learning. The participants in the current study used metacognitive strategies in the same level of frequency as the students in Oxford (1990) and Philips's (1991) studies.

The high scores in the social and affective areas suggest that Iranian postgraduate learners are more feeling-oriented rather than thinking-oriented. According to Oxford (2001), a feeling-focused student is concerned with social and emotional factors but does not make decisions based on logic and analysis. Social strategies were used to compensate for the lack of meaningful English language input. Social strategies may also be used in order to make up for learners' deficiencies in listening comprehension. Therefore, social strategies essentially function as compensation strategies for this population.

The high use of compensation strategies was also found in Bremner's (1999) and Park's (2005) study. Learners use compensation strategies, such as making guesses and using gestures in order to make progress in communication in the absence of a complete knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, idioms, and other language elements. In addition, emphasis on compensation strategies may reflect the students' lack of exposure when learning foreign languages; therefore, they employ such strategies in Iran's input poor environment (Hojjati, 1998).

Cognitive and memory strategies were the least frequently used strategies among the participants. Oxford (1990) suggested that cognitive strategies are essential in

learning a new language because these strategies operate directly on incoming information. This result implies that insufficient use of cognitive strategies might be due to the learners' inability or unwillingness to practice and analyze in the target language or their lack of knowledge about how to learn a foreign language.

Many studies found that Asian learners use memory strategies as their least frequent used strategy (Lee, 2001; Chou 2002; Park, 2005) similar to the results of this study. It is possible to speculate that the participants in the current study were not familiar with systematic mnemonics or specific techniques in memory strategies. Thus, these students reported using fewer memory strategies on the SILL.

Regarding attitude, since learners with positive attitude try to become a member of the target language community, they do their best to know more about the techniques or strategies which can help them acquire a better command of the target language. This might be a reasonable justification for the more frequent use of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies in particular and total language learning strategies in general by the participants holding positive attitude in this study. Regarding the students with negative attitude, lecturers should help students to change their beliefs and get some flexibility toward language and language learning (Oxford, 2001).

Mean score for different types of motivation showed that integratively-motivated students used strategies more frequently than instrumentally-motivated students. Integrative motivation was the most significant factor and strongly related to language learning strategy use in the previous studies (Schmidt and Watanabe, 2001; Zarafshan, 2002). Results of this study also support earlier research. The findings implied that integratively-motivated students who acquire language for their daily life or for social purpose, reported to use all strategy types more often than instrumentally-motivated ones who learn language for getting a better job or for pursuing knowledge in their specific fields of study. Integrative motivation strongly enhances the learners' willingness to use learning strategies, because this motivation involves learners' positive attitudes toward the target language group and language learning, as well as their intention to communicate and integrate with members of the group (Dornyei, 1994).

In the present study, integratively-motivated students reported to use significantly more cognitive strategies than instrumentally-motivated ones while memory strategies were significantly used more frequently by instrumentally-motivated students. In accordance with Chang and Huang's research (1999), integrative motivation is significantly associated with cognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies involve deep-processing strategies such as analyzing and reasoning. Okada et al. (1996) asserted "learners with a strong will to pursue their goal

would no doubt be active in planning, organizing, and evaluating their own study” (p.118). Besides, integrative motivation is correlated with conceptual learning but not rote learning. Some considerable studies proposed that integrative motivation is associated with active involvement (Harter, 1992), persistence, participation (Miserandino, 1996), pleasure (Patrick et al., 1993), and more learning activities outside of school (Stipek, 1998). Accordingly, these may support the findings of the present research. Furthermore, Chang and Huang (1999) explained that EFL learners with instrumental goals possibly prefer memory strategies which cost them minimum time and effort. It seems true for the participants of the current study.

Finally, Table 7 showed that students of art used strategies more frequently than students of science. However, the students of art significantly used cognitive strategies more frequently than students of science. A number of studies showed that the learners in humanities, art, and social sciences reported using language learning strategies more commonly than did learners in other majors including science (Chang, 1991; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). Humanities and art students, in comparison with science and engineering students might be more self-directed in seeking out opportunities to engage in language practice, and could be more driven by an explicit goal of attaining high-level language competence, as compared to science and engineering students who might have a different learning focus, such as mastery of domain-specific knowledge and skills (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989).

CONCLUSION

A number of conclusions can be drawn based on the results. Based on the above-mentioned findings of the current study, the following implications can be stated. First, learning about strategies should not be understood only in terms of direct instruction. Rather, they are developed in actual practice where individuals, initially inexperienced and unaware, practice completely and actively in natural settings. Second, how individuals approach language learning strategies in the classroom should be investigated by language teachers. Developing an awareness concerning one's own language learning strategy use begs the opportunities to provide for students to self-assess, set goals, plan course of action to fulfill these goals, and identify themselves in their own process of learning. Third, according to the theory of good language learner, a good language learner uses all strategies at a high level of frequency (Oxford, 2001). Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to motivate their students to use all of the strategies during their learning process.

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