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

Mohammad Reza Ananisarab

English Department, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Shahid Beheshti University

E-mail: reza_ananisarab@yahoo.co.uk

Heidar Abdi (Corresponding author)

18 Shahid Rejaeei Street, Divandarreh 6641656541, Iran

E-mail: h_abdi62@yahoo.com

Abstract

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 learners were chosen at the contexts of pre-university, private school, and university. Using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), the researchers investigated EFL learning strategy use among the participants of the study. The results showed that there was a significant difference in using cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social strategies and overall use of learning strategies among learners in these contexts and also 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.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, context of learning, learners

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 to be a strong learning tool in language learning (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). Ellis (2008) comments that "the study of learning strategies has been motivated by both the wish to contribute to SLA theory by specifying the contribution that learners can make to L2 learning and by the applied purpose of providing a research-informed basis for helping learners to learn more efficiently through identifying strategies that 'work' and training them to make use of these" (p. 703).

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).

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).

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).

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 wants to investigate the role of context of learning in language learning strategy use. The questions addressed are:

1. What are the types and frequency of learning strategies used by pre-university, private school, and university learners?

2. Is there any significant difference between the type and frequency of learning strategies used by learners in these three different contexts of use?

3. Is there any relationship between gender and language learning strategy use in each of these contexts?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Language earning strategies

Research into language learning strategies began in the 1960s. Particularly, developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies (Wiliams and Burden, 1997). 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). The behaviors good language learners engaged in (Naiman et al., 1978) became the focus of research in the hope of making some generalizations about how to increase the efficiency of L2 learning and teaching.

The term language learning strategy has been defined by many researchers. Rubin (1987) defined learning strategies as "strategies that contribute to the development of the language system which the learners construct and (which) affect learning directly (p.23). Oxford (1990) defined learning strategies as "specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). 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" (p. 11). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined learning strategies as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1). Such strategies are usually contrasted with communication strategies, which are, unlike learning strategies, concerned with the production of L2 input, not its acquisition and internalization. Language leaning strategies are also contrasted with learning style due to their problem oriented nature: strategies are used when a learner is faced with a specific learning difficulty, and his/her strategic approach may change in accordance with the nature of the learning problem faced, styles, on the other hand, are relatively fixed and do not change dramatically from one learning task to the next (Brown, 1994).

Language Learning Strategies have been classified by many scholars. However, most of these attempts to classify language learning strategies reflect more or less the same categorizations of language learning strategies without any radical changes. Rubin (1987) divide learning strategies into three groups of learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. In another classification, Oxford (1990) makes a distinction between two broad classes of learning strategies: direct and indirect. Direct strategies deal with "language itself in a variety of specific task and situation" (p. 14) while indirect strategies are for "general management of learning" (p. 15). Direct learning strategies include memory strategies (for storing and retrieving new information), cognitive strategies (for comprehending and producing language), and compensation strategies (for overcoming gaps in the learner's L2 knowledge). Indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies (for dealing with the management and coordination of the learning process), affective strategies (for regulating emotional of second language learning), and social strategies (for learning through interaction with others). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) divide language learning strategies into three main subcategories: metacognitive, cognitive, and socioaffective strategies. Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Cognitive strategies relate to direct manipulation of the learning material. Socioaffective strategies are concerned with the control of affect and interaction with others. Cohen (1998) and Stern (1992) have also classified language leaning strategies that are similar to these classifications.

2.2 Contexts and language learning strategies

Several studies reported the influence of ESL versus EFL differences on strategy use. For example, Riley and Harsch (1999) found that the environmental differences could play an important part when learning another language. Likewise, the relatively scarce opportunities for input and output in a study of Japanese ESL students resulted in student report of a

pattern of strategy use characterized by special emphasis on certain metacognitive strategies, as well as certain cognitive strategies such as reading aloud (Takeuchi, 2003). Recently, researchers (for example, Lantolf and Appel 1994; Gao 2006), influenced by the work of Vygotsky and others, have asserted that the development of learner strategies is highly affected by social context in which they occur. From this perspective, strategies are linked both to specific cognitive activities and also to the social communities in which they occur. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), activities, tasks, functions, and understanding do not exist in isolation, but are built on complex systems of relationships developed within social settings.

Grainger's study (1997) with 133 learners of Japanese with various ethnic backgrounds found no significant differences in overall SILL scores among native English speakers, those from European backgrounds, and those students from Asian backgrounds. The study, however, revealed that Asian-background students were better at managing their affective state, remembered more effectively, and compensated better than students with English-speaking background.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 244 Iranian male and female students in the contexts of pre-university, private school, and university. In order to partially homogenize the participants the researchers chose pre-university students with a relatively high proficiency of English, fresh students in the context of university and intermediate students in the context of private school.

The number of participants in the pre-university was 46 males and 44 females. The age of students ranged from 17 to 18. The number of students in the private school was 35 males and 35 females. Although the age of the students ranged from 14 to 25, almost 90 percent of the students were under 18. The number of students at the university was 32 males and 32 females. The age of the students ranged from 19 to 23.

3.2 Instruments

SILL is a self-scoring, paper-and-pencil questionnaire which consists of a series of statements to which students are asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always). SILL was chosen for this study because it is used "to measure learners' self-reported strategy use in both second and foreign language settings" (Ellis, 2008, p. 705) and has been widely used. It consists of fifty items and according to Oxford it is designed to collect data on the six categories of language learning strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Its Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients range from 0.89 to 0.98 in various studies.

To avoid any misinterpretation, the researchers administered a translated version of the questionnaire. Since the questionnaire used in this study had been validated and translated in previous studies the researchers did not need to go through validation and translation processes and the researchers used the questionnaire which was prepared by Mohammadpour (2008). The Cronbach alpha reliability of the translated version of SILL was calculated to be 0.90.

3.3 Procedure

SILL was administered in three stages for the three contexts of learning. The learners were fully briefed as how to answer the questions; they were also given enough time to answer the items of questionnaire.

3.4 Analysis

Data analyses included the computation of measures of descriptive statistics to compile demographic information of the participants and to calculate overall strategy use. To address the second research question, the researchers carried out a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the mean differences of language learning strategy use in the contexts of pre-university, private school, and university. To address the third research question, the researcher conducted a two-tailed independent t-test to study gender differences in each context of learning. The significance level for the mean variation was set at $p < 0.05$, the standard used in most quantitative research studies. In this study the SPSS Windows statistical package was used to analyze the data.

4. Results and Discussion

For answering the first research question the researchers gathered the descriptive statistics of learners in each context of learning.

<Table 1 about here>

As can be seen from Table 1 in these three contexts metacognitive and social strategies were the most favored strategies. Favoring metacognitive strategies means that learners were in favor of finding ways to use their English, noticing their

English mistakes and using that information to help them do better. It helped them delay speech production to focus on listening, set goals and objectives, and finally identify the purpose of a language task. Using social strategies more than the other strategies after metacognitive ones means the participants were in favor of strategies like asking for correction, cooperating with others, developing cultural understanding, and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings.

The learning environment of these contexts may be a prime contributor in several ways to the preferred use and selection of both metacognitive and social strategies. In terms of metacognitive strategies, learners enrolled in these contexts to learn English typically had a strong instrumental motivation for learning English. Unlike learners who might enroll in a foreign language for fun or self-advancement or because a language course is required (what Diab (2000) refers to as integrative reasons), students in these contexts are learning English to advance their academic and professional lives. The (self-imposed) threat of failing the program is a huge motivator for taking control of their learning.

These contexts may also play a role in the more frequent use of social strategies by the participants, many of whom showed a strong preference for asking for repetition, correction, help, and for cooperating with peers. In terms of the participants' high social strategy use, which is a departure in some ways from culturally driven learning practices that are more independent, the instruction in these contexts might strongly encourage and support more interactive learning for the sake of developing greater linguistic fluency.

In the contexts of pre-university and private school affective strategies were favored least by the subjects. In the context of university memory strategies were the least favored ones. Affective strategies enable learners to gain control over their emotions, attitude, and motivation through anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward.

Although these learners reported that they tried to relax when they were uncertain about speaking English and encouraged themselves to speak even when they were afraid of making a mistake, the lowest use of affective strategies in the first two contexts shows that subjects viewed strategies in managing their emotions as the least helpful in language learning. This can be due to the fuzzy and intangible link one can imagine between feeling and learning and to a greater extent can be a possible outcome of a test-oriented and score-driven educational system. When a student is evaluated by just an end-of-the-term test and just by a score as the sole sign of knowledge on the course, thinking about feelings as implementing English, rewarding oneself when doing well, and keeping a journal of feelings are too idealistic to be practical and too unnecessary to be tried. Asian culture encourages listening to others and discourages public discussion of feelings. As the students participating in this investigation were Iranian with Asian culture, their upbringing and previous school experiences may have impacted their behavior in this area (Politzer, 1983; and Reid, 1987). Using memory strategies less than the other strategies in the context of university means that they were less in favor of using flash cards and rhymes in remembering new words, using new words in a sentence, and thinking of relationships what they already know and the new things they try to learn. This indicates that students spent significantly more time regulating and managing their learning than storing and recalling new information and it also indicates that students made little use of specific techniques or mnemonic devices to enhance their memorization efforts. Low use of memory strategies was initially surprising in that these are largely in keeping with the instructional delivery systems typically employed in Iran which are frequently didactic and emphasize rote memorization. However, further examination of the literature revealed that other studies have also had findings which contradict this perhaps too common assumption that Asian students have strong preferences for memory strategies rather than communicative strategies such as working with others, asking for help, and cooperating with peers (Wharton, 2000; and Yang, 1999).

The band scale provided for the inventory defines those who score from 1 to 2.4 as low strategy users, those who score from 2.4 to 3.5 as medium strategy users and high strategy users would be those who score from 3.5 to 5. Using this band scale the following distinctions can be made among the learners of each context of learning.

<Tables 2 &3 about here>

Being medium strategy users in these three contexts more than high and low strategy users may be due to the participants' conservativeness in reporting themselves as extremes in a novel field and ticking most of the items as "sometimes" would probably keep the participants on the safe side. In the contexts of private school and university the number of high strategy users in comparison to pre-university context was more which might due to difference of instruction in these contexts. The context of private school and university may emphasize a more interactive approach in teaching and learning. Another reason may be motivation that the students in the contexts of university and private school may have more than pre-university students.

To investigate the second research question, a One-way ANOVA was run to investigate the significant difference in using each type of language learning strategies in these three contexts of learning and also to investigate the significant difference in using language learning strategies overall. The results are summarized in Table 3.

As can be seen from this table there was a significant difference in using language learning strategies in these three contexts. Regarding the significant difference in using each type of strategy there was a significant difference in using cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies and there was not a significant difference in using memory, and compensation strategies.

The significant difference in language learning strategies use in these contexts emphasizes the environmental differences in using language learning strategies and the opportunity for input and output in these contexts which might have led to this result.

To investigate the third research question an independent *t*-test was conducted. The results are summarized in Table 4.

<Table 4 about here>

Although in these contexts female students used language learning strategies more than male students, as Table 4 presents there was a significant difference between gender and language learning strategy use just in the private school context. Orenstein (1994) found that the learners' passage into adolescence is marked by their loss of confidence in themselves and self-underestimation in language learning strategy use. The reason that there was a significant difference in learning strategy use in the private school might be due to the fact that private school students were at least 2 or 3 years younger than the students in the other two contexts and they had not lost their self-underestimation.

5. Conclusion

The present study intended to investigate the role of context of learning in language learning strategy use. In this study strategy use reported by these learners indicated a high preference for metacognitive strategies which helped them in directing, organizing, and planning their language learning. Also in this study, affective strategies in the contexts of pre-university and private school and memory strategies in the context of university were used less than the other strategies. In this respect practical actions can be taken by teachers in language classrooms in terms of integrating strategy instruction into the regular lessons. Language learning strategies are teachable (Oxford, 1990).

The findings that learners at the contexts of university and private school reported more strategy use than learners at the context of pre-university indicate that learners at different levels have different needs in terms of teacher intervention in the learning process. For example, teachers in the context of university and private school help the students to use language communicatively, but teachers in the context of pre-university maybe help their students master some grammatical points and vocabulary items and understand reading passages.

The results of the study show that that most of the students were medium strategy users and the findings of this part of the study is in line with Borzabadi (2000) and Mohammadpour (2008). The findings of the study showed that there was a significant difference in using language learning strategies in these contexts of learning that is consistent with the finding of some of the previous language learning strategy studies such as Riley and Harsch (1999). The findings of the study also showed that there was not a significant relationship between gender and language learning strategy use in the contexts of pre-university and university but there was a significant relationship between gender and language learning strategy use in the contexts of private school. The literature is full of mixed results regarding the relationship between males and females in using language learning strategies. Much research has shown that females tend to use more learning strategies than males (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Oxford 1990). Some found no significant relationship between gender and language learning strategy use (Mohammmadpour, 2008; Griffiths, 2003).

It is the hope of present researchers that this study is replicated in informal settings and contexts to see the difference of strategy use in formal and informal contexts. In addition, it is recommended to administer an Iranian version of SILL to Iranian learners of English studying in Iran.

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Table 1. Strategy use of pre-university, private school and university learners

Strategy	Pre-university		Private school		University	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Memory	3.12	.652	3.19	.618	3.14	.529
Cognitive	3.08	.687	3.49	.615	3.46	.495
Compensation	3.15	.670	3.35	.706	3.31	.412
Metacognitive	3.33	.767	3.86	.654	3.85	.515
Affective	2.85	.716	3.14	.710	3.31	.643
Social	3.17	.761	3.83	.809	3.48	.797

Table 2. Language learning strategy use frequency

Strategy users	Pre-university		Private school		University	
	f	p	f	p	f	p
Low	11	12.23%	5	7.15%	2	3.13%
Medium	61	67.77%	34	48.57%	37	57.81%
High	18	20%	31	44.28%	25	39.06%

Table 3. One-way ANOVA of language learning strategies

Strategy	df	F	Sig
Memory	2	.35	.704
Cognitive	2	11.92	.000
Compensation	2	2.63	.074
Metacognitive	2	17.34	.000
Affective	2	9.93	.000
Social	2	14.41	.000
Overall	2	12.61	.000

Table 4. Independent *t*-test on the relationship between gender and language learning strategy use in each context of learning

Context	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Pre-university	male	46	3.08	.500	-.709	88	.480	-.085
	female	44	3.17	.640				
Private school	male	35	3.35	.488	-2.32	68	.023	-.265
	female	35	3.62	.466				
University	male	32	3.39	.418	-.963	62	.339	-.097
	female	32	3.49	.388				