THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND THE ESPECIAL EMPLOYED LEARNING STRATEGIES DURING EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Most of the early studies in the field of language learning strategies focused on identifying the characteristics of good language learners. Identifying and discussing the strategies used by good language learners were considered as a good way to make the learners aware of the notion of language learning strategies. The present study was an attempt to collect and classify the characteristics of representative good language learners, developing English as a foreign /second language in Iran; specifically those who had achieved high scores in the IELTS General Module.

And also this study aimed at identifying the characteristics associated with a good language learner in one area: learning strategies. Thirty-four Iranian IELTS candidates receiving 6+ band score were selected to participate in this study. They were interviewed and asked to write down their own reports of the experiences they had in developing their second language. They were asked to report their preferred strategies while studying English as well. They were also requested to fill out the learning strategy and learning style questionnaires. The results of interviews and open ended questions were specifically organized and classified via employing both descriptive and explanatory methods. The learners' responses to the standardized questionnaires also were analyzed by SPSS system Version 20. The findings of the present study although revealed that there is a high correlation between IELTS scores, strategy taking inventory scores. This revealed that the learners recording high scores in IELTS use appropriate learning strategies.

Keywords: Language learners, learning strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Research in the area of characteristics of good language learners has been the home of choice for SLA researchers since mid 1970. In this regard, both learning and learner variables have been researched (see Griffiths, 2008).

Yet, one of the features almost left intact in this scope is the relationship between the characteristics of good language learners and their achieved scores and results in the standard proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL.

Most of the early studies in the field of language learning strategies focused on identifying the characteristics of good language learners. Identifying and discussing the strategies used by good language learners were considered as a good way to make the learners aware of the notion of language learning strategies. The findings provided insight into how successful learners learn, and, subsequently, teachers tried to teach the strategies used by successful learners to those who were unsuccessful with the hope the strategy training could help them become successful.

Rubin' seminal article (1975) is considered as one of the early studies in pursuing the characteristics of good language learners. She stated that "if we knew more about what the "successful learners" did, we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record" (p. 42). She also noted that the employment of these strategies was affected by a number of factors such asL2 proficiency, age, situation, and cultural background. Later, these characteristics were extended by Rubin and Thompson (1982, cited in Brown, 2007).

Learning a second language involves variety of social, cognitive, affective and educational setting factors. A lot of individuals develop a very well-organized L2 experience and a lot more are not successful second language learners. Rubin (1975) implies that the successful second language learners enjoy specific characteristics which might be helpful, providing us with strategies and insights which probably could be helpful for the poorer learners of the second language.

Iranian learners develop English as a foreign language and for many of them learning English is a burden and one of the most important and demanding tasks they will need to accomplish. That is why an awareness of how to learn a language, not just what to learn, is very important for these learners. Knowledge of the characteristics of a good language learner can help students increase their language learning efficiency. Additionally, recognizing the features of good language learners might provide the teachers and ELT educators with a vehicle to help the poor learners of the second language to improve their learning.

The results of the study might be found intriguing enough to shed some lights for the researchers to investigate the application of specific strategies the good language learner makes use to pave the way for the ones who have not been successful in this respect. It is hoped that the result of this study can help the ELT educators and second language teachers to provide the poor learners with a tentative way of success.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Good Language Learner
A number of recent studies on language learning strategies have attempted tried to define the "Good" language learner. During the 1970s, teachers and researchers reached conclusion that no single method of language teaching and research findings would end to the universal success in teaching a second language (Brown, 2007). It seems that learners would be successful in language learning regardless of methods or teaching techniques.

In this regard, Brown (2007) says that, "Certain people appeared to be endowed with abilities to succeed; others lacked those abilities" (p.132). Many observations and research studies (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Rubin and Thompson, 1994) tried to describe "good" language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles, and strategies. In this regard, Zare (2012) believes that good language learners:

- ➢ Find their own way, taking responsibility for their own learning,
- ➢ Organize information about language,
- ➢ Are creative, and try to feel the language by experimenting its grammar and words,
- ➢ Create opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom,
- ➢ Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting confused and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word,
- ➢ Use memory strategies to bring back what has been learned,
- ➢ Make errors work for them and not against them,
- ➢ Use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language
- ➢ Use contextual cues to help them in comprehension,
- ➢ Learn to make intelligent guesses,
- ➢ 11. Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform "beyond their competence",
- ➢ Learn to use certain tricks to keep conversations going,
- ➢ Learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence,
- ➢ Learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language regarding the formality of the situation. (p. 1-2)

The studies on defining the good language learner provide a basis for the understanding of what good language learners do in order to learn a second language. Finding and clarifying the strategies of successful language learners helps the teachers and researchers to teach these strategies to less successful learners. On the other hand, the methods and criteria of determining a good language learner is unclear and under question.

It seems easy to classify a language learner as a good one: if s/he has developed the four basic skills and can use them successfully, she/he is considered as a good language learner.

The problem is to decide about a learner who has only learned one or two of these skills. Speed of acquisition, learner's previous exposure to English, learner's goal, and student's level of proficiency should be taken into account in determining the good language learner (Sewell, 2003).

However, understanding and knowing the strategies and techniques good language learners' use, can help them enhance learning efficiency.

Learning Strategies & Classifications
Wenden and Rubin (1987) described learning strategies as "any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information" (p.19).

Also, Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) state that "learning strategies are 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). Learning strategies were also illustrated by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1).

One of the most noticeable definitions which have been referred to a lot in the literature has been provided by Oxford (1990). She 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).

It is, in fact, a reflection of what the learner intends to do and the specific actions he can take. Also, Oxford (1990) includes how context plays a crucial role in the language learning process.

O'Malley *et al*. (1985) divided language learning strategies into three main categories: Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, and Socioaffective Strategies.

Metacognitive Strategies
O'Malley *et al*. (1985) state that metacognitive is an expression to indicate an executive function; in fact, such strategies "... involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, observing one's production or comprehension, correcting one's own mistakes, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed" (Zare 2012, p. 4). Based on O'Malley's classification, advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, and self-evaluation are included among the major metacognitive strategies.

Cognitive Strategies
It has been stated (Brown, 2007) that "Cognitive strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and they involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself" (p. 134). Repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, and inferencing are considered as the most important cognitive strategies.

Socioaffective Strategies
Socioaffective strategies are highly related to social-mediating activity and interacting with others. The main socioaffective strategies include cooperation and question for clarification (Brown, 2007).

Learning strategies which are divided into two main types (cognitive learning strategies and metacognitive learning strategies) make a direct contribution to the development of the language system created and used by the language learner. According to Rubin (1987), cognitive strategies refer to the steps or measures which are taken in learning or problem-solving that involves direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Also, Rubin (1987) identified six major cognitive learning strategies highly related to language learning as: clarification/verification, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, practice, memorization, and monitoring.

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Metacognitive strategies are used to supervise, control or self-direct language learning. They involve different procedures as planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management.

Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are not as much of directly related to language learning since their emphasis is on the process of communication through conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Communication strategies are employed by the speakers when they are faced with some troubles regarding their communication and conversation or when they are misunderstood by another speaker. Communication strategies benefit from the speaker's linguistic or communication knowledge in order to remain in the conversation.

Social Strategies

Social strategies are considered as the activities in which learners grasp the opportunities that can be a great help to practice their knowledge. Even though these strategies offer exposure to the target language, they contribute to learning indirectly since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language (Rubin, 1987).

Learners Variable Motivation

It is no doubt that good language learners are motivated. Experienced teachers believe that high achievers are highly motivated as well. The personal motivation has been the source of success during the life. Without motivation, success will be hard to come by, and the case of learning a second or foreign language would be different. Motivation is listed by Rubin (1975) among the three essential variables on which good language learning depends.

Also, Gardner and Lambert (1972) cited in Ushioda (2008) believe that motivation has a social-psychological perspective on learner attitudes and is related to the language cultures and the native speakers. Gardner and Lambert (1972) saw language learning motivation qualitatively different from other forms of learning motivation.

Also, Gardner and Lambert (1972) cited in Ushioda (2008) found out that learners' attitudes to the new culture and people had a great influence on their motivation leading to their success in learning a new language.

Age

The role of age in development of second language acquisition and the relationship between age and other affecting variables in learning a new language has been hotly debated. There are different ideas about the impact of age on language development and different research studies add to this controversy.

According to Brown (2007) young language learners are better language learners than adults. Some of these research studies are about the analogies between the process of first language acquisition and second language learning. In this regard, Brown (2007) believes that this is a big mistake.

If we consider language learning as a cognitive process, the age of the language learner will play a great role in being successful in this process.

METHOD

Participants
A group of 56 IELTS candidates (both male and female) taking part in the IELTS preparation courses in the TEFL research center, Tehran, Iran were given a version of a standardized IELTS test (documented as specimen Materials, 2003EMC/1667b/3y01UCLES 2003) which consisted of 25 listening comprehension items, 35 reading comprehension items, and 2 types of writing. The test was administered for purpose of selecting the appropriate candidates for the study. The 34 participant selected to take part in the study were the ones receiving6 + band score. It is worth mentioning that the scientific background, major, gender, age, and other individual differences of the learners were not taken into consideration in the present study.

INSTRUMENTATION

Interviews With Participants
Both controlled and open ended (free) types were employed. The interviews with the participants were recorded, listened to, and analyzed for their main points.3.2.2.

Free writing of the participants
Then the participants were asked to answer the questions in the essay type form. This ensured the researcher if they had missed a point in the interview session.

IELTS General Module
A Standard version of the IELTS General Module test (documented as Specimen Materials, 2003EMC/ 1667b/ 3y01 UCLES, 2003), the reliability of which, based on K-R 21, was reported to be .78 and its construct validity based on the Cronbach's alpha was acceptable (α= .74).
Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Version 7.0, developed by R. Oxford (1989), available atricharddpetty.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/sill-english.pdf
Learning Style Questionnaire developed by Barsch (2009) available at
http://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html

Validity and Reliability Of The Data Collection Instruments
The *interview items* for both styles and strategies were developed based on the prominent concepts reported in the literature (Barsch, 2009; Ehrman, 2008; Felder& Henriques, 1995; Griffiths, 2008; Reid, 1987; Ting-Hui, 2006)

Procedures
56 IELTS candidates taking part in the preparation courses of IELTS General Module in the TEFL research center, Tehran, Iran took part in a standard version of IELTS General Module. They were tested against the criteria set for the four skills in the IELTS General Module. The experienced IELTS examiners dealing with the job administered the test specifically in the speaking part. 34individuals whose overall scores were 6+ were selected for the study. They were interviewed and asked to write down their own reports of the experiences they had in developing their second language.

They were asked to report their preferred strategies while studying English as well. They were also requested to fill out the55learning strategy and learning style questionnaires.

The results of interviews and open ended questions were specifically organized and classified via employing both descriptive and explanatory methods. The learners' responses to the standardized questionnaires also were analyzed by SPSS system Version 20.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Qualitative Study

Which learning strategies are mostly employed by good language learners of English in the Iranian context?

To answer the question 34 participants of the study were interviewed and then they were asked to answer the questions in the essay type form and write their own self reports concerning the strategies they use while studying their lessons or throughput their general process of learning English as a second/foreign language. This ensured the researcher if they had missed a point in the interview session and also allowed the participants to feel free to present whatever they thought in a less stressful situation and correct their own writings and present their ideas the best way possible. The interviews with the participants were recorded, listened to, and analyzed for their main points. The self reports of the learners also were analyzed through axial and open coding methods (Creswell, 2008).

Through the interview and report results, frequency of each and every style related description was pursued. To do so participants' proposed items were transcribed, coded, and categorized. The most prominent points represented by the participants of the study were as follows:

Analyzing the interviews, observations and writings of the participants presented the researcher with the following results which represented good language learners' characteristics in two domains of personality features and the strategies they mostly use:

> ➤ **Personality features: Language learners of the study showed to be1. Tolerant, 2. Extrovert, 3. Responsible for their own learning, 4. Intuitionists, 5. Feeling type, and 6. Mostly perceiving**
> ➤ **Strategies used: The strategies the participants mostly employed were as follows:**
>   - **Using monolingual dictionaries.**
>   - **Listening to tapes, news, and stories in English.**
>   - **Watching films attentively and looking up the new words in case needed.**
>   - **Speaking in English with friends and practicing the new things learned in various contexts.**
>   - **Being very interested in talking to the native speakers whenever possible (in the meetings, seminars, and conferences or while travelling abroad.**
>   - **Concentrating on what other successful learners say.**
>   - **Being open to criticisms to minimize their problems and also eradicate them.**
>   - **Consulting teachers of English and putting to application the suggestions made.**

- **Reading a lot of issues in English, specifically the books and articles in their majors.**
- **Trying to write in English and asking teachers of English or friends to check their writings.**
- **Keeping a portfolio of their notes to be reviewed in case required.**
- **Seeking for the differences between British English and American English accents.**
- **Creating an imaginary interlocutor to talk to.**
- **Trying to say everything in English, including whatever observed in the immediate environment.**
- **Transcribing news, dialogues, short stories, etc...to improve listening comprehension.**
- **Concentrating on the content of films, narrations, and books and discussing them with friends.**
- **Being interested to work with the foreign companies, the claimed reasons are social prestige as well as well paid jobs.**
- **Concentrating on the articulation of sounds through watching films, listening to the tapes and asking for help from teachers of English.**
- **Discussing the English words with friends and comparing it with the native culture.**
- **Using English vastly in their jobs.**
- **Using the internet, tutor, face book, chat rooms, and the like to get connected to the new friends or be in contact with the world around.**

Quantitative Study

In order to investigate the strategies used by the Iranian students taking part in IELTS preparation courses in TEFL research center 34 students with different backgrounds received the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Version 7.0, developed by R. Oxford (1989). This version of the strategies inventory for language learning has been designed for students of English as a second/ foreign language. There are statements about learning English including Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Meta-cognitive, Affective, Social strategies. Based on their real situations of English learning, participants were required to choose the answer. Participants were also briefed that the survey was not a test so they did not need to be worried about the results affecting their academic performance. There are fifty questions being categorized into six main strategies. *Memory Strategies* contain nine questions.

Cognitive Strategies contain fourteen questions. **Compensatory Strategies** contain six questions.**

Meta-cognitive Strategies contain nine questions. Affective Strategies include five questions. Social Strategies include seven questions. This questionnaire takes about 20-30 minutes to complete.**

The questionnaires were gathered and analyzed based on the scales presented in the manual and the average frequency of the language learning strategy use of the learners was reported. ccordingly the frequency of language learning strategies use was also computed. Table 1 (See Appendix A) represents the frequencies thereof.

Table 1 shows the results of the survey. In this questionnaire, the highest grade in Memory strategies is 4.0, the lowest grade is 2.1, and the average grade is 2.9.

Table: 1
Frequency of Language Learning Strategies Use

	Memory	cognitive	Compensation	Meta-cognitive	Affective	Social
Highest grade	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.1	4.4	4.7
Lowest grade	2.1	2.5	2.3	2.0	2.4	2.4
Average grade	2.9	3.1	3.7	3.1	3.3	3.4

In the chart, we can see learners get lower grade than other strategies. The highest grade in Cognitive strategies is 4.0, the lowest grade is 2.5, and the average grade is 3.1. Obviously, the participants do not get high grade in these strategies either.

From this, we know people use the two strategies not often. The highest grade in Compensation strategies is 5.0, the lowest grade is 2.3, and the average grade is 3.7. Compared with other strategies, it gets the highest grade.

The highest grade in Meta-cognitive strategies is 4.1, the lowest grade is 2.0 and the average grade is 3.1. The highest grade in Affective strategies is 4.4 the lowest grade is 2.4, and the average grade is 3.3. The highest grade in Social strategies is 4.7, the lowest grade is 2.4 and the average grade is 3.4. It seems that the frequency of the three strategies is in the middle part.

According to the average grades, the researcher ranked the six main learning strategies and found out that Compensatory strategies were the top choice for participants. The second top main strategy was Social strategies and was closely followed by the Affective strategies. Then, Cognitive and Meta-cognitive strategies got the same grades and are equally used by the students. Surprisingly, Memory strategies were the least one to be used by the participants.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the present study in terms of strategies assert that acceptable insights into describing a good language learner may come from strategy research that seems to suggest that those who can employ more strategies effectively are better language learners. The very point has been certified in the quantitative and qualitative researches accomplished in the SLA domain (Amiri & Jalilzadeh, 2011; Griffiths, 2008; Kohonen, 2006; Lund & Pedersen, 2001; Sewell, 2003).

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed that there is a high correlation between the good language learners' scores in the IELTS test and their obtained scores in strategy inventories.

The study findings also reported the most significant strategies employed by the Iranian highly proficient learners of English (IELTS 6+ band scores).

Although, on an individual level, there are exceptions, in general, the results of this study indicate that the most proficient students (IELTS 6+ band scores, who are called good language learners in the present study) report frequent use of a large number of language learning strategies, defined as specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of learning language.

This finding accords with the conception of language learning as a cognitive activity in which the learner is an active participant, capable of processing linguistic information and affecting learning outcomes.

Upon the findings, a pattern of strategy use emerges from the questionnaires which enable a strategy profile of the highly proficient student to be suggested. Based on the results of this study, the most proficient groups of students appear to use strategies which enable them to work consciously on their general second language ability and to interact frequently with others (both native and non-native speakers) in English. The learners emphasize employing strategies enabling them keep more vocabularies in mind and activate them.

The learners report using strategies related to reading and strategies such as avoiding literal translation which facilitate the tolerance of ambiguity. They seem to have effective techniques for understanding the systems of the new language (for instance by looking for relationships and patterns and by studying grammar) and to use affective strategies to manage their feelings so as to remain relaxed and positive.

Successful learners also report the use of strategies which enable them to manage their own learning and to utilize effectively available resources (such as TV, songs and movies).

Pedagogical Implications

Employing a mixed research method the present study attempted to elicit the most prominent strategies Iranian good language learners of English employ in their journey of second language development.

Both teachers and learners of English in the EFL context of Iran and similar contexts could be benefitted from the findings of the present study as the strategies reported are the familiar and easy-to-do ones which could be employed by the second language learners in various levels.

Suggestions for further research

This study, although producing some interesting findings regarding the relationship between proficiency and the language learning strategies reportedly used by EFL learners of English, has also raised questions which might provide fruitful areas for further research. Among these might be:

> Although (according to the results of this study) this profile may characterize the most proficient students in overall terms, learner variables (such as nationality, sex, age) must be considered when investigating reported language learning strategy use. In the context of the current study, such variables were not taken into consideration.

Another study therefore could be designed to investigate the relationship between the aforementioned variables of the learners and their strategy preferences.

➢ The same hypothesis can be formulated for Iranian language learners at different levels of language proficiency. It is worth investigating whether providing learners at various proficiency levels with the strategies investigated in the present study could have the same effects on the learners' general proficiency.

➢ Work needs to continue on the grouping of strategies, on investigating the degree to which students report using one group or another and the relationship with proficiency.

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