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On the Relationship between Students' Language Learning Strategies and their Level of Language Proficiency in University Context

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Abstract. This study aimed at exploring the relationship between students' level of language proficiency and their Language Learning Strategies used. A group of sixty five EFLlearners (32 junior and 33 senior) were randomly selected from EFL students majoring in English translation and English literature at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman. All the participants were native speakers of Persian.To obtain the required data Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) was used to determine the type of Language Learning Strategies that participants used. The results of the study showed that there were not any significant differences between junior and senior EFL learners regarding Language Learning Strategies sub-parts, namely:Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social learning strategies that they used. Also in order to answer the research question regarding the participants' Language Learning Strategies use based on the three levels (high/mid/low) in two groups of junior and senior students, for each strategy, a Chi-Square Test was launched to explore the differences among the groups. In this study, none of the groups yielded significant results. Meaning that the difference in proficiency level, junior/senior, did not affect the levels of each strategy the participants used.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, Level of Proficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today learning English as an International language is absolutely necessary. Due to its importance English as a Foreign Language (EFL) taught to Iranian students from guidance school up to university level. In spite of the amount of exposure to English, its use in daily life is limited and the proficiency of the students does not meet expectations of the instructors. However, Studies showed that students' approaches to learning a foreign language are different from each other. Based on their abilities and their personal characteristics they start the process of learning in a special way.These special ways are considered by Oxford and Ehrman (1998) as second language learning strategies.In the past years, much evidence has shown that Language-Learning Strategies (LLS) are closely related to a learner's language proficiency (Chen, 1990; Park, 1997). Many studies have shown learners with different language proficiency adopt different patterns and frequencies of LLSs in foreign language learning (Peacock & Ho, 2003).

The correlation between LLSs and second language proficiency cannot be neglected since it provides valuable information for teachers to design appropriate LLStraining to students with different language proficiencies. Also with an improved knowledge of appropriate LLSs, learners can actively monitor their learning pattern and greatly improve their language proficiency (as cited in Ghavamnia, Kassaian, & Dabaghi, 2011).

Although many researches are conducted to explore the relationship between students' level of proficiency and their LLSused, this research tried to investigate it once morebecause of its importance in education that more insights can be gained regarding the learning process and due to the contradictory results that are reported from previous researches. However, this research tried to investigate the relationship between students' level of proficiency andLLSin Iranian

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EFL context. This study is a response to a need for more language learning strategy research with students from different contexts.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Language Learning Strategies

The role of LLSin the teaching-learning process cannot be denied. It is believed that if the learners are taught the strategies, they are empowered to manage their own learning (Nikoopour & AminiFarsani, 2010).

Several key definitions of learning strategies have been given by a number of leading figures in the second and foreign language field. Oxford (1989) considered learning strategies as behaviors which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) considered learning strategies as the special thoughts and behaviors that individuals use to comprehend, learn, or retain new information (as cited in Nikoopour & AminiFarsani, 2010). Oxford and Ehrman (1998) considered second LLSas specific behaviors used by students to enhance their own learning. Brown (2007) defined strategies as "specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information " (p.119). They are the specific "attacks" on a given problem that vary considerably within each individual (Brown, 2007, p. 132).

Learning strategies that language learners employ in the process of learning a new language have been identified and described by different researchers. These strategies have been classified by many professional experts in the area of language learning as well.

O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, kupper, and Russo (1985)classified LLSinto three main categories: (a) metacognitive strategies, (b) cognitive strategies, and (c) socioaffective strategies. Rubin (1987) classified LLS into three types: (a) learning strategies, (b) communication strategies, and (c) social strategies. These strategies contribute directly or indirectly to language learning (as cited in Zare, 2012).

Stern (1992) classified LLSinto five main groups: (a) management and planning strategies, (b) cognitive strategies, (c) communicative – experiential strategies, (d) interpersonal strategies, and (e) affective strategies (as cited in Zare, 2012).

Oxford's (1990) classification of LLSwhich is the theoretical frame work of this research consists of two main categories, direct and indirect, which are also subdivided into six classes. She classified direct learning strategies into three main groups: (a) memory strategies, (b) cognitive strategies, and (c) compensation strategies (as cited in Ghorbandordinejad, 2010).

Memory strategies are specific devices used by learners to make mental linkages that will allow new information to enter and remain in long-term memory. These strategies include making associations with what has already been learned, drawing pictures to help the learner to remember new words, and repeatedly pronouncing or writing new words in order to remember them (Rae L, 2005).

Cognitive strategies help learners process and use the language for learning or for accomplishing a task involving the language (Rae L, 2005). Examples of cognitive strategies are practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output (Ghorbandordinejad, 2010).

Compensation strategies are intended to make up for missing knowledge while listening, reading, speaking, or writing (Rae L, 2005). Examples of compensation strategies are guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (Ghorbandordinejad, 2010).

In addition, indirect strategies are classified into three subcategories: (a) metacognitive strategies, (b) affective strategies, and (c) social strategies (Ghorbandordinejad, 2010).

Metacognitive strategies enable learners to control their own cognition. These strategies include overviewing and linking with material already known, paying attention, delaying speech production, organizing, setting goals and objectives, planning for a language task, looking for practice opportunities, self-monitoring and self-evaluating (Zare, 2012).

Affective strategies help the learners to manage their emotions, motivations, and attitudes associated with learning. They can be achieved through lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking emotional temperature (Zare, 2012).

Social strategies refer to how learners interact with other people in the context of learning languages and related culture. These strategies include ask someone to speak slowly, practice with others, and show interest in learning about the culture of English-speaking countries. (Rae L, 2005).

2.2. LLS and learners' proficiency level

Researches on LLSshowed that there are different factors that influence the choice of different strategies by the learners**.** The learner's proficiency level was one of those factors.O'Malley et al. (1985) investigated the range, type, and frequency of LLSs used by beginning and intermediate high school L2 learners. Their results revealed that while both groups used more cognitive than metacognitive strategies, intermediate students used more metacognitive strategies than the beginners. On the other hand, a translation strategy was used more by beginners, whereas contextualization was used more by the intermediate level students.

Chen (1990) conducted a research on the relationship between communication strategies and the proficiency level of L2 learners. The results of the study showed that low-proficiency students employed more communication strategies than high-proficiency ones. High-proficiency learners mainly employed linguistic-based communication strategies while low-proficiency ones mainly made use of knowledge-based strategies.

In a research on the relationship between the use of LLS and the proficiency level of 332 Korean students learning English as a foreign language, Park (1997) reported that there was a linear correlation between LLS use and language proficiency. Furthermore, all six categories of LLSs as well as the overall strategy use were significantly correlated with the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores which was used to examine the students' proficiency level. In a study by Akbari and Talebinezhad (2003) on the relationship between the use of LLSby Iranian learners of English, their foreign language proficiency, and the learners' IQ scores, it was revealed that there is a positive relationship between the use of second LLSby the participants and their proficiency scores.

Moreover, Peacock and Ho (2003) examined the relationship between the use of LLSs and the proficiency level of 1006 English for Academic Purposes students in eight different majors in Hong Kong. The results of the study showed significant correlations between strategy use and proficiency level. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies showed very high correlations with the proficiency level of the participants and were used by high-proficiency learners. Compensation strategies were shown to be favored by both high- and low-proficiency students.

In another study, Khabiri and Azaminejad (2009) investigated the relationship between EFL learners' use of LLSand self-perceived language proficiency at two levels of intermediate and advanced. The results of the study showed that there is a significant relationshipbetween the two variables among advanced-level participants,while no such relationship exists among intermediates. Salahshour, Sharifi, and Salahshour (2012) investigated the relationship between learner's choice of learning strategies, frequency of their use, and level of proficiency in English. According to the results, Proficient learners showed significantly more strategy use, as well as more use of metacognitive and social strategies. To find the interrelationship between the use of LLSs and the language proficiency level of the participants the following research questions are posed.

2.3. Research Questions

1- Is there any significant difference between students' LLSuse regarding their level of proficiency?

2- Is there any significant difference between students' level of LLSuse regarding their level of proficiency?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were sixty five EFL learners, thirty junior and thirty senior students, which are randomly selected from EFL students of Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman. All the participants were native speakers of Persian. In this research senior students are considered to be more proficient than junior ones based on the assumption that they passed more courses in English and the fact that they are exposed to English language and context more than the junior ones.

3.2. Instruments

To obtain the required data Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Questionnaire is used to determine the type of LLSthat participantsused. SILL was developed by Oxford (1990). This questionnaire contains 50 items organized according to six-subset strategy taxonomy (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies). Items 1-9 concern the effectiveness of memory (memory strategies); items 10-23 concern the use of mental processes (cognitive strategies); items 24-29 are the compensation for missing knowledge (compensation strategies); items 30-38 deal with the organization and evaluation of learning (metacognitive strategies); items 39-44 concern emotion management (affective strategies); and items 45-50 deal with learning with others (social strategies).The instrument measures the type and the frequency of strategy use.

3.3. Procedure

The SILL questionnaire was handed out to the participants as the instrument of the study and they were asked to answer to the entire questions base on the instructions above it. SILL consists of 50 items. Items 1-9 concern the effectiveness of memory (memory strategies); items 10-23 concern the use of mental processes (cognitive strategies); items 24-29 are the compensation for missing knowledge (compensation strategies); items 30-38 deal with the organization and evaluation of learning (metacognitive strategies); items 39-44 concern emotion management (affective strategies); and items 45-50deal with learning with others (social strategies). Subsequently, the data were subjected to statistical analyses. The Statistical Package

for Social Sciences (SPSS) was applied for this purpose. The descriptive statistics was calculated primarily to determine what kinds of LLSIranian EFL students studying English at Bahonar University of Kerman use.

4. RESULTS

Having an overall view of the nature of participants regarding the scales tested, a descriptive statistics of variables is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the variables

	N	Range	Min	Max	Mean	S. D	Variance
Memory Strategy	65	25.00	18.00	43.00	27.84	5.52	30.47
Cognitive Strategy	65	45.00	22.00	67.00	47.70	8.20	67.27
Compensation Strategy	65	18.00	12.00	30.00	19.75	4.35	18.93
Metacognitive Strategy	65	28.00	17.00	45.00	34.18	6.72	45.27
Affective Strategy	65	23.00	7.00	30.00	18.18	4.57	20.93
Social Strategy	65	20.00	9.00	29.00	20.87	5.21	27.20
Valid N (listwise)	65						

This table shows the number of participants, range, min, max, mean, standard deviation, and variance of the gathered data.

The number of participants based on their proficiency level (32 junior and 33 senior students) is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Proficiency Level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Junior	32	49.2	49.2	49.2
	Senior	33	50.8	50.8	100.0
	Total	65	100.0	100.0	

In order to investigate the first research question regarding the proficiency level (junior/senior) and learners' strategy use, for each strategy, an Independent Samples T-Test was run. The results are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3. Proficiency Level (junior/senior) and Learners' Strategy use.

Level of Proficiency	Junior			Senior			t	df	Sig.
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD			
Memory	32	26.87	5.49	33	28.78	5.45	-1.40	63	.164
Cognitive	32	46.53	8.85	33	48.84	7.74	-1.41	63	.258
Compensation	32	19.46	4.14	33	20.03	4.59	-.517	63	.607
Metacognitive	32	33.53	6.63	33	34.81	6.85	-.768	63	.445
Affective	32	17.71	4.86	33	18.63	4.30	-.806	63	.423
Social	32	21.78	5.47	33	20.00	4.87	1.386	63	.171

According to the results, there were not any significant differences between junior and senior EFL learners regarding the memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social learning strategies. That is because of the fact that none of the mentioned strategies had p-values lower than.05 (Table 3).

In order to investigate the second research question regarding the students' LLSuse based on the three levels (high/mid/low) in two groups of junior and senior students, the participants were categorized into three levels, namely low, mid, and high. These categories were investigated in relation with the two groups of junior and senior participants. For each strategy, a Chi-Square Test was launched to explore the differences among the groups. In this study, none of the groups yielded significant results. Meaning that difference in junior/senior did not affect the levels of each strategy the participants used. In other words junior and senior participants belonged to roughly the same levels of each strategy and used the same strategies regardless of the level of proficiency they belonged to. The corresponding tables (4 to 9) for each strategy are presented below.

Table 4. Memory Strategy Level.

Count **Crosstab**					
		Memory Strategy Level			Total
		Low	Mid	High	
Proficiency	Junior	4	23	5	32
	Senior	5	17	11	33
Total		9	40	16	65

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.246[a]	2	.197
Likelihood Ratio	3.305	2	.192
Linear-by-Linear Association	.972	1	.324
N of Valid Cases	65		
a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.43.			

Table 5.Cognitive Strategy Level.

Count **Crosstab**					
		Cognitive Strategy Level			Total
		Low	Mid	High	
Proficiency	Junior	2	16	14	32
	Senior	1	12	20	33
Total		3	28	34	65

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.949[a]	2	.377
Likelihood Ratio	1.962	2	.375
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.886	1	.170
N of Valid Cases	65		
a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.48.			

Table 6. Compensation Strategy Level

Count **Crosstab**					
		Compensation Strategy Level			Total
		Low	Mid	High	
Proficiency	Junior	4	16	12	32
	Senior	5	11	17	33
Total		9	27	29	65

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.884[a]	2	.390
Likelihood Ratio	1.894	2	.388
Linear-by-Linear Association	.422	1	.516
N of Valid Cases	65		
a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.43.			

Table7. Meta-cognitive Strategy Level.

Count **Crosstab**					
		Metacognitive Strategy Level			Total
		Low	Mid	High	
Proficiency	Junior	2	8	22	32
	Senior	1	9	23	33
Total		3	17	45	65

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.399[a]	2	.819
Likelihood Ratio	.405	2	.816
Linear-by-Linear Association	.087	1	.769
N of Valid Cases	65		
a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.48.			

Table 8. Affective Strategy Level

Count **Crosstab**					
		Affective Strategy Level			Total
		Low	Mid	High	
Proficiency	Junior	8	17	7	32
	Senior	6	16	11	33
Total		14	33	18	65

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.190[a]	2	.552
Likelihood Ratio	1.198	2	.549
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.094	1	.296
N of Valid Cases	65		
a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.89.			

Table 9. Social Strategy Level

Count **Crosstab**					
		Social Strategy Level			Total
		Low	Mid	High	
Proficiency	Junior	5	5	22	32
	Senior	5	12	16	33
Total		10	17	38	65

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.815[a]	2	.148
Likelihood Ratio	3.906	2	.142
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.133	1	.287
N of Valid Cases	65		

a. 1 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.92.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide a deeper understanding of strategy use among EFL students in Iran. Strategy use is a complicated phenomenon which depends on a number of factors. Students' level of proficiency is one of those factors which were investigated in this research. According to the findings of the current research, there were not any significant differences between junior and senior EFL learners regarding the memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social learning strategies.

The findings of the previous researches were not in line with the findings of the current research. In O'Malley et al. (1985) investigation, the results revealed that intermediate students used more metacognitive strategies than the beginners. Chen (1990) conducted a research on the relationship between communication strategies and the proficiency level of L2 learners. The results of the study showed that low-proficiency students employed more communication strategies than high-proficiency ones. Park (1997) reported that there was a linear correlation between LLS use and language proficiency. In a study by Akbari and Talebinezhad (2003), it was revealed that there is a positive relationship between the use of second LLSby the participants and their proficiency scores. Peacock and Ho (2003) examined the relationship between the use of LLS and the proficiency level of students in eight different majors in Hong Kong. The results of the study showed significant correlations between strategy use and proficiency level. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies were used by high-proficiency learners. Salahshour, Sharifi, and Salahshour (2012) investigated the relationship between learner's choice of learning strategies, frequency of their use, and level of proficiency in English. According to the results, Proficient learners showed significantly more strategy use, as well as more use of metacognitive and social strategies.

However, the effective role of strategies can't be denied in the students' achievement. Although there are many researches that were done on this issue, but there is contradiction among the results of the researches. So, it is suggested that further research should be done. The implication of this research is for second language pedagogy. It revealed the necessity of raising awareness among language learners of the functions and usefulness of learning strategies so that they become encouraged to select and use more appropriate strategies at various stages of learning their second language.

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Appendix A

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

Developed By Oxford (1990)

Version for Speakers of Other Languages Learning English

Name: **Age:** **Sex:**

Directions:

This form of the strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) is for students of a second language (ENGLISH). Please read each statement and select the response (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) that **tells HOW TRUE THE STATEMENT IS.**

1. Never or almost never true of me (1)
2. Usually not true of me (2)
3. Somewhat true of me (3)
4. Usually true of me (4)
5. Always or almost always true of me (5)

Answer in terms of how well the statement describes you. **There is no right or wrong answer** to these statements. Please work as quickly as you can without being careless.

Part A

1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the new word to help me remember the word.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I physically act out new English words.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I review English lessons often.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	1	2	3	4	5

Part B

10. I say or write new English words several times.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I try to talk like native English speakers.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I practice the sounds of English.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I use the English words I know in different ways.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I start conversations in English.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I read for pleasure in the English.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	1	2	3	4	5

19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I try to find patterns in English.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I try not to translate word for word.	1	2	3	4	5
23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	1	2	3	4	5

Part C

24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	1	2	3	4	5
25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	1	2	3	4	5
26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I read English without looking up every new word.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	1	2	3	4	5
29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	1	2	3	4	5

Part D

30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	1	2	3	4	5
31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	1	2	3	4	5
32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	1	2	3	4	5
33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	1	2	3	4	5
34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	1	2	3	4	5
35. I look for people I can talk to in English.	1	2	3	4	5
36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	1	2	3	4	5
38. I think about my progress in learning English.	1	2	3	4	5

Part E

39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	1	2	3	4	5
41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	1	2	3	4	5
42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	1	2	3	4	5
43. I write down my feelings in a language learning dairy.	1	2	3	4	5
44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	1	2	3	4	5

Part F

45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or to say it again.	1	2	3	4	5
46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	1	2	3	4	5
47. I practice English with other students.	1	2	3	4	5
48. I ask for help from English speakers.	1	2	3	4	5
49. I ask questions in English.	1	2	3	4	5
50. I try to learn about the culture of the English speakers.	1	2	3	4	5