Emotional Intelligence, Tolerance of Ambiguity, and Language Learning Strategies Use of EFL Learners: A Study of Relations

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Abstract. The present study aimed at investigating the relationship among EFL learners' emotional intelligence, tolerance of ambiguity, and language learning strategies use. The data was collected from 75 EFL senior undergraduate students majoring in English regarding the relationship among their emotional intelligence, tolerance of ambiguity, and language learning strategies use. To this end, three instruments of Emotional Intelligence Scale (Schutte et al., 1998), Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Ely, 1989), and Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990), with the focus on metacognitive, affective and social strategies, were administered. The results demonstrated there was no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity. But emotional intelligence was found to have a significant positive relationship with metacognitive, affective, and social learning strategies use. Moreover, tolerance of ambiguity was revealed to bear no significant relationship with the use of metacognitive and affective strategies, but its relationship with social strategies use was significantly negative. The existence or non-existence of any relationship provides the audience with some implications at the end.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, tolerance of ambiguity, language learning strategies use, EFL learners
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1. INTRODUCTION

Going through the history of English language teaching to non native speakers, whether as a second or foreign language, reveals the fact whatever done in this respect was and has been targeted at the learners' learning. Different theories of learning, different methods of teaching, assessment methods, teaching and learning strategies and context, consideration of social, cultural, psychological, mental and other relevant factors all have tried to contribute positively to learning, the ultimate aim behind teaching. Definitely, it is hard to say out of these numerous factors which ones play the most crucial role in language learning as their degree of contribution may vary from context to context and person to person. Sometimes these factors directly affect the learning and sometimes indirectly by affecting other factors that in turn have their positive or adverse impact on learning.

With more focus on an EFL context, the researchers would emphasize on three of these factors namely: Emotional intelligence, tolerance of ambiguity, and language learning strategies. Emotional intelligence is one of the most crucial psychological factors which seems to be often overshadowed by intelligence (IQ).Tolerance of ambiguity is a personality style being so important in such a context like a foreign language learning which is inherently full of ambiguities for the language learners. Finally, the use of language learning strategies whose crucial role in learning is undeniable.

In the following sections, a general overview of these three factors, their significance in language learning and their relationship with each other are presented.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is generally the skill of understanding and managing both your emotions and the emotions of others around you. This kind of intelligence is first put forward by Thorndike (1920) but not under the name of emotional intelligence. He makes a distinction between social intelligence and other kinds of intelligence and defines it as the ability to perceive others including men, women, boys and girls and to act wisely in our interpersonal relationship. In a way it means to get along with others, understanding our emotions and behaviors and those of others. Wechsler (1940) suggests that intelligence includes some affective components which may be crucial to achievement in life. In the book called *The Shattered Mind,* Gardner (1975) introduces the concept of multiple intelligence in which different kinds of intelligence are distinguished in away. In another book by Gardner (1983), *The Frames of Mind,* he refers to personal intelligence divided into intra and interpersonal intelligences including knowledge about the self and others. The aspect of this personal intelligence which is related to feelings is very close to what is called emotional intelligence.

Later, Payne (1985) in his doctoral dissertation introduced the term emotional intelligence. In an article published by Beasley (1987) the term emotional quotient (EQ) was suggested, but Bar-On (1988) claimed the coinage and the use of the term EQ for the first time as a counterpart to IQ in an unpublished version of his doctoral dissertation. Then the psychologists, Salovey and Mayer (1990), defined emotional intelligence as a subcategory of social intelligence involving the capability of a person to perceive emotions and integrate them to guide his/her thinking and ,via such an understanding, emotions can be regulated leading to personal growth.

Moreover, Goleman (1995) popularized emotional intelligence and defined this concept as the ability to recognize our own feelings as well as the feeling of others by which we can motivate ourselves and manage emotions well in ourselves and our relationships. He classified the skills of emotional intelligence as follows. 1. self- awareness (knowing our emotions, our positive and negative points); 2. self-regulation (controlling and managing our emotions); 3. motivation (motivating ourselves); 4. empathy (understanding emotions in other people); and 5. social skills (handling our relationship with others).

Bar-On (2004) mentioned emotional intelligence as a combination of social and emotional abilities helping people adjust themselves with the demands of daily life. He also believes that emotional intelligence addresses many aspects of intelligence including social, personal, survival and emotional ones. Meanwhile he states that emotional intelligence can change through life and can be improved through training. It is stated that the concept of emotional intelligence conveys that IQ itself cannot guarantee a person's success and the emotions and behavioral elements of the person shall also be considered (Hein, 2003).Although higher IQ has been synonymous with more success in a new setting, research has shown that EQ accounts for success more than IQ in life and education (Goleman, 1995; Salovey&Mayer, 1990).

Research findings also indicate the importance of emotional intelligence in classrooms (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004).In an experimental study undertaken by Pishghadam (2009) , he demonstrates that in the product-based phase of his study, not the process-based, emotional intelligence has played a key role in learning different skills of language specially the productive ones. Moreover, Riemer (2003) suggests that knowing the skills of emotional intelligence is instrumental in the learning potential of foreign language acquisition since it is related to accepting the legitimacy of other cultures to be equally valid.

Considering the relationship between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity few studies have been undertaken to study this relationship directly, and in a study undertaken by

Nosratinia, Niknam and Sarabchian (2013) no statistically significant relationship is found between these two variables. AugostoLanda, Martos, and Lopez-Zafra (2010) consider emotional intelligence as the provider of useful information to solve everyday problems. So the problems arising from the intolerance of ambiguities might be solved. Also, in another definition by Akbarzadeh (2004), emotional intelligence is viewed as consisting of different capabilities of which resistance against difficulties and postponing impulsivities and their control stop the confusion which in turn weakens the thinking power. And, needless to say, ambiguities in a second or foreign language are of the main causes of difficulties and confusion for the learners. Moreover, Bar-On (2000) talks of these non-cognitive abilities as important factors to succeed in life and get along with the world. Accordingly, it seems that learning of another language with all its ambiguities, inherent in language learning situations, requires some sort of tolerance of ambiguities.

The degree of tolerance of ambiguity in a learner, which is dealt with in details in section 2.2, is one of the determining factors in language learning. A new language, a new context, a new culture, and the like are full of ambiguities and uncertainties. It is something unknown at the beginning posing its own special problems. Now it is obvious that using your emotions intelligently is very helpful in overcoming these uncertainties and ambiguities inherent in a new language.

Considering the relationship between emotional intelligence and language learning strategies use, whose appropriate application are of great importance in language learning, a significant relationship between the participants' total emotional intelligence and learning strategies in both genders is found in a study conducted by Hasanzadeh and Shahmohamadi (2011). In line with this study the results of another research shows a significance relationship between emotional intelligence and language learning strategies (Nosratinia, et al., 2013). Meanwhile, Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford (2003) indicate that the teacher's better understanding of a learner's styles of learning and his/her traits would help the instructor in devising an appropriate syllabus and implementation of strategies fitting the learner's style and personality. So, needless to say that awareness of emotional intelligence of the learners would be one of the best instruments in hand of the teachers to achieve the aforementioned goals.

2.2. Tolerance of Ambiguity

A style is a consistent characteristic in any person, a mode of identification making him or her different from another person (Brown, 2007). Among these inherent styles within a person, tolerance of ambiguity is the one attributed to the personality styles or psychological traits of a person. When you encounter ideas, notions, beliefs, behaviors and the like contradicting your beliefs or information, you may partially or completely contradict or *tolerate* them (Brown, 2007). It is also defined as the acceptance of uncertainties (Ely, 1989).

Tolerance of ambiguity can be broken down into two parts: ambiguity and tolerance. Concerning the word *ambiguity,* different definitions have been put forward. Generally speaking, uncertainty in real life situations is regarded as ambiguity. McLain (1993) considers ambiguity as not having enough information about a setting. Budner (1962) identifies 3 ambiguous situations: new, complex, and contradictory situations. In these situations enough information is not provided, there might be too much information, or the information is not easy to distinguish from another piece.

The other part of this term is the word *tolerance.* Based on the definition provided by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009), the term tolerance refers to the tendency to let others express their views, beliefs, and the like without objecting or even punishing them.

It is also defined in the said dictionary as the degree to which a person can tolerate inconsistencies, difficulties, and so forth without being damaged. All in all, the whole construct of tolerance of ambiguity is rooted in your personality (Ely, 1989).

The significance of tolerance of ambiguity in language learning seems to be axiomatic in L2 learning contexts. A new learning context poses its own novelty, complexities, vagueness and the like. As it has been stated, the case of learning a second or foreign language with its own contradictory information requires the learner to be more tolerant of ambiguities to get success. However, there should be a balance, being neither too much tolerant nor too much intolerant of ambiguities (Brown, 2007).Many of the ambiguous situations are also common in language learning, be it in the classroom with a group of students (Ely, 1995) or individually when people engage in self-instructed language study (White, 1999). Accordingly, all these notions are highlighting the crucial role of tolerance of ambiguity in language learning.

Moreover, the choice of language learning strategies whether consciously or unconsciously done is heavily rooted in the individual differences. So, tolerance of ambiguity as an inherent style in an individual is a determining factor in adopting a learning strategy. As mentioned by Ehrman and Oxford (1990), the learner's level of tolerance of ambiguity can influence the implementation of different learning strategies.

2.3. Language Learning Strategies

Based on the definition provided by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009), strategy refers to a planned series of actions to achieve something. Oxford (1990) talks of strategies as approaches or techniques used by learners to increase the development of l2 skills. In the view of Wenden (1991), strategies are considered as mental actions taken by learners to learn l2 and direct their efforts in l2 achievement. Richards and Platt (1992) have used the term intentional behavior and thoughts for strategies that learners utilize while learning. Via these strategies, learners can better understand, learn or recover new information. The choice made by a learner in the process of learning or using a second language having an impact on learning is another definition put forward by Cook (2001).Griffiths (2007) also defines learning strategies as conscious choice of activities that learners implement to regulate their learning.

Different classifications have been proposed for learning strategies. Rubin (1981) divides them into learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies which contribute to language learning directly or indirectly. O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, and Kupper's (1985) classification includes metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies .Oxford (1990) also like Rubin (1981) divides the learning strategies into direct and indirect ones but with different subcategories.In her classification , direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies which require mental processing of the target language. On the other hand, indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Since the three subcategories of the *Indirect Strategies* of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning developed by Oxford (1990) have been adopted in this paper, this categorization is put forward in more details as follows.

A. *Direct Strategies*
  1-Memory: to store information e.g. applying images and sounds
  2-Cognitive Strategies: mental strategies to make sense of learning e.g. analyzing and reasoning
  3-Compensation strategies: to overcome language gaps, to continue conversation e.g. guessing intelligibly

B. *Indirect Strategies*
> 1-Metacognitive Strategies: to regulate your learning. Knowing about your knowing e.g. evaluating your learning
> 2-Affective Strategies: to meet your emotional needs e.g. lowering your anxiety
> 3-Social Strategies: to promote interaction with target language e.g. asking questions

There is no doubt in the importance and positive contribution of learning strategies to language learning. Allwright (1990) and Little (1991) highlight the learners' learning strategies as means which may make the learners more independent, autonomous, and lifelong learners. Some researchers have stated that the students utilizing a good number of strategies feel being effective learners, or, specifically talking, they enjoy a high level of self-efficacy (Zimmerman & Prons, 1986). In another study , the difference between more effective and less effective learners is found to be related to the ability of the first group (more effective ones) to reflect on and articulate their own language learning processes (Nunan, 1991).In line with these results in a study conducted in Iran by Gerami and Madani Ghareh Baghilou (2011), it is reported that successful university students seem to be aware of the importance of English learning and try to utilize some strategies to facilitate their learning. The wider learning strategies used by these successful students were different from those preferred by unsuccessful participants of this study.

3. AIM OF THE STUDY

The present study aimed at exploring the relationship among three variables: emotional intelligence, tolerance of ambiguity, and language learning strategies use in EFL learners. To this end, three major research questions and six corresponding minor questions were formulated to seek the above stated relationship. The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity?

2. Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and subscales of Language Learning Strategies Use (metacognitive, affective, and social strategies)?

> 2a Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and metacognitive language learning strategies use?
> 2b Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and affective language learning strategies use?
> 2c Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence, and social strategies use?

3 Is there any statistically significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and the subscales of Language Learning Strategies Use (metacognitive, affective, and social strategies)?

> 3a Is there any statistically significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and metacognitive strategies use?
> 3b Is there any statistically significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and affective strategies use?
> 3c Is there any significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and social strategies use?

4. METHODOLOGY
4.1.Participants

This study was undertaken at Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Literature, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Iran. A total number of seventy five EFL senior undergraduate students majoring in English participated in this study. To select the participants, probability sampling procedure was employed. Basically, the formal questionnaires were distributed by one of the researchers. Fortunately, after checking the items of the questionnaires carefully, no participant was discarded from the study. The age range of the participants was between 21 to 27.

4.2. Instrumentation

The following questionnaires, all in a 5-point Likert scale format, were used for data collection.
1. Emotional Intelligence Scale by Schutte et al., 1998 (33 items)
2. Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale by Ely, 1989, 12 items
3. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning by Oxford, 1990 (21 items)
       3.1. **Metacognitive Strategies** (9 items)--items 1 to 9
       3.2. **Affective Strategies** (6 items)items-- 10 to 15
       3.3. **Social Strategies** (6 items)items --16 to 21
In this study just 3 subscales of this inventory were used

4.3. Procedure for data collection

The data were collected in spring semester of the academic year 2013-2014.The two intact classes of senior students of English were chosen randomly, and the questionnaires were delivered to them by one of the researchers in one session for each group. It took around 40 minutes for each class to complete the task. After the data were collected, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18, was utilized to run the statistical tests.

5. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics of the variables, the first stage in data analysis, were calculated and presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the variables

	N	Range	Min	Max	Mean	S. D	Variance
Emotional Intelligence	75	83.00	87.00	170.00	115.90	15.28	233.49
Tolerance of Ambiguity	75	27.00	24.00	51.00	38.66	5.79	33.57
Metacognitive Strategies	75	34.00	14.00	48.00	32.36	6.36	40.47
Affective Strategies	75	20.00	10.00	30.00	17.50	3.80	14.49
Social Strategies	75	17.00	9.00	26.00	18.84	3.51	12.32
Valid N (list wise)	75						

6. ANALYSIS

In order to answer the first research question, "Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity?", statistical test of Pearson Correlation was conducted (Table 2).

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Table 2. Correlation between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity

		Emotional Intelligence	Tolerance of Ambiguity
Emotional Intelligence	Pearson Correlation	1	.074
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.526
	N	75	75
Tolerance of Ambiguity	Pearson Correlation	.074	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.526	
	N	75	75

Regarding the relationship between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity, as indicated in Table 2, since *p*-value (Sig. 2-tailed)) is not smaller than alpha level of 0.05 (*p*=0.526), it is concluded that there is not a significant relationship between EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity and their emotional intelligence.

In order to explore the second research question "Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and three of the subscales of language learning strategies use namely metacognitive, affective and social strategies?" statistical test of Pearson Correlation was conducted (Table 3).

Table 3.Emotional intelligence in relation with language learning strategies

		Metacognitive Strategies	Affective Strategies	Social Strategies
Emotional Intelligence	Pearson Correlation	.282*	.312**	.240*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	.006	.038
	N	75	75	75

Regarding the relationship between emotional intelligence and metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies, the subscales of language learning strategies, as indicated in (Table 3), all three language learning strategies subscale have a moderate significant positive correlation with emotional intelligence. Thus, the statistical results of first three minor research questions are as follows:

2a Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and metacognitive language learning strategies use?
Yes, there is a moderate significant positive relationship (r =0.28, *p* = .014).

2b Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and affective language learning strategies use?
Yes, there is a moderate significant positive relationship (r = 0.31, *p* = 0.006).

2c Is there any statistically significant relationship between emotional intelligence and social language learning strategies use?

Yes, there is a moderate significant positive relationship (r = 0.24, *p* = 0.038).

In order to explore the third major research question "Is there any statistically significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and 3 of the subscales of language learning strategies use?" statistical test of Pearson Correlation was conducted. Regarding the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and metacognitive, affective, and social strategies use, the subscales of language learning strategies, three Pearson correlations were launched (Table 4).

Table 4. Tolerance of ambiguity in relation with language learning strategies.

		Metacognitive Strategies	Affective Strategies	Social Strategies
Tolerance of Ambiguity	Pearson Correlation	.015	-.032	-.333**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.898	.785	.003
	N	75	75	75

According to Table 4, among the three strategies, only social strategies had a negative significant correlation with tolerance of ambiguity (r=-0.33). Metacognitive and affective strategies did not show any significant relationships with tolerance of ambiguity. Thus, the second three minor research questions with the statistical results are as follows:

3a Is there any statistically significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and metacognitive language learning strategies use?
No, there is not.
3b Is there any statistically significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and affective language learning strategies use?
No, there is not.
3c Is there any statistically significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and social language learning strategies use?

Yes, there is a significant negative relationship (r = -0.333, *p* = 0.003).
In other words, students with higher levels of tolerance of ambiguity use less social strategies, and vice versa.

7. DISCUSSION

The present study was an attempt to investigate the relationship among emotional intelligence, tolerance of ambiguity, and three of the subscales of language learning strategies use named metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The participants were EFL learners of English. The findings of the study are discussed considering the available works of other researchers in this area.

The results reached regarding the first major research question indicated no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity. Nosratinia et al. (2013) also reached the same result. Yet, putting into our mind the special features and capabilities of this intelligent use of emotions in dealing with uncertainties and problems facing a learner specially in new context (Akbarzadeh ,2004; Augosto et al. , 2010; & Bar-On , 2000) makes it impossible to ignore its role. Accordingly, further studies are recommended to be undertaken to this end.

With regard to the second major research question and the three corresponding minor ones, it was found emotional intelligence had a significant positive relationship with metacognitive, affective and social language learning strategies use. These statistically significant relationships were also reported by Nosratinia et al. (2013). Moreover, the results of the study undertaken by Hasanzadeh and Shahmohamadi (2011) indicated such a significant relationship.In line with the above, Aghasafari (2006) reported a considerable relationship among these variables. All these findings are again highlighting the effective role of emotional intelligence in language learning, a variable whose absence deems problematic and impedes learning.

Meanwhile, considering the very important role of language learning strategies use in language learning (Cohen, 2000; Ellis, 1985; Rubin, 1975, 1981; Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, &Todesco, 1978; O'Malley et al, 1985;& Oxford, 1990), once more the mind of the researchers becomes concerned with this special intelligence and its impact on the use of learning strategies in L2 learning contexts.

In this study, the answer to the third major research question, with its corresponding minor research questions, revealed no statistically significant relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and metacognitive and affective strategies use. But, a significant negative relationship was found between tolerance of ambiguity and social strategies use. Considering the classification and definition of learning strategies provided by Oxford (1990), whose inventory for language learning strategies was used in this study, these findings might in a way be justified. In her classification, a learner who tries to identify his/her own preferences and needs, plans, monitors mistakes, and evaluates the success is using metacognitive learning strategies. And the one who attempts to identify his/her mood and anxiety level, talks about feelings, rewards him/her self, and breathes deeply or uses positive self-talk is actually implementing affective learning strategies. Concerning the nature of these activities used by a learner, it seems ambiguities and uncertainties do not occupy a specific place in them. So, the level of tolerance of ambiguity may make no impeding or accelerating effect in the use of these strategies. Yet, further studies deem to be necessary to be conducted in this area.

However, the last finding concerning the third minor question seeking the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and the use of social language learning strategies demonstrated a significant negative relationship between these two variables. This indicated that the participants with a high level of ambiguity tolerance used social strategies less and vice versa. Oxford (1990) states that if you as a learner ask questions, ask for clarification and help, talk with native speakers as a partner in conversation, and explore cultural and social norms, you are applying social learning strategies. So if a leaner is tolerant of ambiguities in a high level there seems the least or even no need to put himself/herself in such a situation to ask questions and seek clarification to learn better. In fact, high tolerance of ambiguity may impede the use of social strategies and the learner seems to have no or less curiosity to ask questions for clarification leading to learning.

8. CONCLUSION

The relationship among the three variables, emotional intelligence, and tolerance of ambiguity, and language learning strategies use in EFL learners was studied. The results revealed varying relationships ranging from not significant, positively significant and even negatively significant. These results might prove differently in different contexts, but the impeding and accelerating effect of these variables on language learning can in no way be ignored. Moreover, there seems to be no priority set for each of these variables and the many other variables not studied in this paper all play their crucial role directly or indirectly in the process of language learning. All in all, talking of learning, especially language learning, contributions of the teachers, learners, styles, strategies, and context still require more research. The finding should be also interpreted considering the educational setting in which the study is undertaken to implement the results more fruitfully. However, the next step after undertaking the study, implementation of the results aimed at improving learning, is still not paid enough attention.

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