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EFL Learners' Use of Direct Strategies in Competitive and Cooperative Learning Contexts

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Abstract: This study investigated the effects of competitive and cooperative teaching techniques on Iranian adult EFL learners' use of direct strategies. To this end, a sample of 88 non-English major university students at Sohrevardi Nonprofit College in Qazvin were assigned to two groups, and each group received instruction under one of the treatment conditions including cooperative and competitive teaching techniques. To collect data, the Persian translation of a modified version of the subsection of Oxford's Strategy Inventory of Language Learning pertaining to direct strategy use was administered before and after the treatment. The obtained data were analyzed using an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) procedure. The result of data analysis showed no significant difference between the effects of competitive and cooperative teaching techniques on direct strategy use of Iranian adult EFL learners. The findings of the present study may have implications for learners, teachers, and syllabus designers.

Keywords: *Competitive teaching techniques, cooperative teaching techniques, direct strategy use*

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Introduction

The need to learn a foreign language is almost as old as human history itself (Wikipedia). Recently, this need has been felt more seriously due to increasing globalization as well as the need for using a common language in areas such as trade, international relations, technology, media, and science. As English is the international language, many researchers have focused on different methods of teaching to find optimal methods and techniques to implement in language classrooms. The history of language teaching methodology has experienced substantial changes from the period of grammar–translation method to the communicative language teaching, task-based approach, learning strategy training and cooperative learning (Brown, 2000). According to Johnson and Johnson (2009), experiential learning and student-centered learning introduced by philosopher Dewey, and social psychologists Piaget and Vygotsky is a base for collaborative learning.

Johnson and Johnson (2009) hold that researchers such as Sexton began to criticize competition in late 1960s, and social scientists (Hartup, 1976; Johnson, 1980; Johnson & Johnson, 1981; Ladd, 1999; Lewis & Rosenblum, 1975) pointed out the necessity of peer interaction. Then, cooperative learning became popular from 1980s, with the advent of communicative language teaching approach, which gave emphasis to the communicative aspects of language and the task-based approach, which created the context for cooperative learning. In this period, and by the work of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and other researchers, the need for stylistic awareness and strategy development in ensuring mastery of foreign language became prominent.

Language learning strategies refer to any conscious actions and techniques which learners perform to improve their second language learning (Chamot, 2004; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Waden & Rubin, 1987).

Researchers have been studying language learning strategies since 1960s. Language learning strategies have been affected by the cognitive approach (Williams & Burden, 1997). Researchers believe that the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered classes has drawn more attention to language learning strategies (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Many researchers have tried to classify language learning strategies; Oxford's (1990) classification is the most comprehensive among them, based on which Oxford Strategy Use Inventory for Language Learning was created to measure the frequency and kinds of strategies learners use. She classifies strategies into: Direct strategies including memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies and indirect strategies including meta cognitive, affective, and social strategies.

Although many researchers have investigated the effects of different learner variables such as age, gender, proficiency level, motivation, autonomy, and

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learners' beliefs and purpose of using language learning strategies, few studies have been done on the effect of environmental factors such as interaction with peers. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of competitive and cooperative teaching techniques on language learning strategy use. With regard to what was mentioned above, by considering the important role of language learning strategies and the significance of creating learning contexts to develop communicative competence, this study aims to compare language learning strategy use in competitive and cooperative learning contexts. More specifically, this study aims to find answers for the following research question:

Is there any significant difference between the effects of competitive and cooperative teaching techniques on direct strategy use of Iranian adult EFL learners?

Literature review

Cooperative learning

Gokhale (1995) defines cooperative learning as grouping and pairing of students at various performance levels to work together in small groups to monitor themselves and evaluate their own and others to achieve an academic goal. Gokhale maintains that cooperative learning refers to an instructional method in which students work in groups towards a common academic goal. However, individual learning refers to an instructional method in which students work individually at their own rate towards an academic goal. Zhang (2010) implies that more participation will inevitably increase self-confidence and self-esteem. Therefore, learners in cooperative learning environments are more active participators and more autonomous learners.

Hung, Mehl and Holen (2013), in a study on the relationship between problem design and learning process in a problem–based environment, found that problem-based learning is a kind of cooperative technique which improves critical thinking and makes learners ready to undertake tasks in the real world. They concluded that the kind of problems in this environment affects learners' cognitive level and influences learners' perception psychologically.

Nassaji and Tian (2010), in their study on collaborative and individual output tasks and their effect on learning English phrasal verbs, investigated the effectiveness of two types of task (reconstruction cloze tasks and reconstruction editing tasks) on learning English phrasal verbs. They also aimed to find out whether doing the tasks collaboratively led to greater gains of target verbs than doing the tasks individually and to examine whether the type of tasks made any difference from pre-test to post-test. They analyzed data using repeated measures ANOVA. They concluded that in the accuracy of production of target items, there was a significant main effect for task type and also a significant main effect of condition, but there was no significant interaction between time and condition. The finding of this study about pair work was consistent with the results of a number of previous studies (Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Stork, 1997; Stork, 2005) suggesting that although collaborative context may lead to better task performance, it may not necessarily lead to subsequent learning of target forms.

Believing that cooperative learning strategies affect English writing skills as well as speaking and reading, Mandal (2009) investigated the impact of cooperative learning on writing skills and concluded that the incorporation of cooperative learning activities fosters peer criticism and critical thinking, which aid learners to sharpen their knowledge about essay structure and grammatical rules, and by also increasing motivation and involvement, improves enhancement in writing skills.

Fatih-Ashtiyani, Salami, and Mohebbi (2007) compared the effects of cooperative learning and traditional learning on the academic achievement of 46 high-school students in two groups and concluded that the cooperative learning model had significant effect on academic achievement, and that the students in the cooperative learning class seemed to have better understanding, while the rates of forgetting decreased. Moreover, more students in the experimental group tended to maintain the cooperative learning style during their educational activities.

Gaith (2003) studied the impact of cooperative learning on reading improvement, academic self-esteem and decreasing the feeling of school alienation of 56 Lebanese high school ESL learners. Gaith found a statistically significant difference in favor of the experimental group in reading achievement. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the control group and the experimental group in variables including academic self-esteem and feeling of school alienation.

In another study, Sachs, Candlin and Rose (2003) studied the effect of cooperative learning on EFL/ESL secondary students' learning in Hong Kong. The results showed no significant differences in the oral performance of the experimental and control groups, but the authors concluded that the students engaged in discussions in cooperative learning environment felt more relaxed and more motivated.

In another study, Gaith (2002) examined the relationship between cooperative learning, perception of social support, feeling of alienation from school, and academic achievement of 135 Lebanese private university students. The results revealed a positive relationship between cooperative learning and the degree of teachers' academic support. Also, cooperative learning positively supported the perceived degree of academic and personal support provided by teachers and peers, whereas learners' feeling of school alienation was found to be negatively correlated with academic achievement.

Language learning strategies

According to Oxford and Crookall (1989), learning strategies are things that learners do to aid their understanding of the target language. O'Malley and Chamot (1990); Oxford (1990); and Waden and Rubin (1987) define learning strategies as approaches and techniques students use to understand the target language and improve their second or foreign language skills. Chamot (2004) adds a new characteristic to this definition and defines language learning strategies as "the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal" (p.14).

Ellis (2008, p.703) argues that the actions that learners take in order to learn a language have been variously labeled as behaviors, tactics, techniques, and strategies. With regard to these definitions, it is worth mentioning that language learning strategies are conscious and intentional techniques which facilitate language learning.

Different researchers have classified learning strategies in different ways. Most of these classifications include more or less the same categories of language learning strategies. According to Rubin (1981), language learning strategies are classified into: direct strategies, which include clarification, verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing, inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, practice; and indirect strategies, which consist of creating practice opportunities and using production tricks such as communication strategies. Brown and Palinscar (1982) classify strategies into three groups: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and affective social strategies. O'Malley, et. al, (1985) offer the same classification.

This study adopts Oxford's taxonomy consisting of two main classes and each class consisting of three groups: direct strategies consisting of memory, cognitive, compensation strategies and indirect strategies consisting of meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies.

Language Learning Strategies

The choice of language learning strategies depends on different factors. These factors include learner variables such as sex, age, school years, proficiency, motivation, anxiety, autonomy, aptitude, learners' purpose of using strategies, and their beliefs and also environmental factors such as institution, interaction with peers and class together (Ames & Archer, 1988; Guilloteax & Dorneyei, 2008; Litthlewood, 1999; Ortega, 2003; Towns, 1998; Vandergrift, 2005). In this study, based on the above mentioned factors such as the interactions of learners and teacher, two kinds of learning context are compared: competitive and cooperative contexts.

More than three decades have passed since the beginning of studies in the area of language learning strategies. Rubin (1975) referred to techniques learners use to acquire knowledge as learning strategies. His research triggered a series of other studies such as Ellis (1985), Oxford (1990), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and Cohen (2000). Most of these studies have shown a positive relationship between strategy use and second language achievement. It has also been shown that both the frequency of strategy use and the choice of strategies can tell the difference between the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful learners.

Zhang and Li (2011) presented a classification for second language vocabulary learning strategies which enable learners to organize various strategies into meaningful categories. Their framework consists of a six-factor structure; four categories are related to cognitive processes of lexical acquisition and the two others are metacognitive and affective factors. The six-factor structure is quite similar to the three-component model proposed by O' Malley and Chamot (1990) with a major difference that the affective factor is combined with the social factor and social strategies become part of the cognitive factor.

Cubukcu (2008) investigated the effectiveness of systematic direct instruction of multiple metacognitive strategies in Turkish English learners. The author concluded that metacognitive strategy training has an important role in developing vocabulary and bettering reading comprehension skills.

Murphy (2008) investigated how distance language course materials support the development of critical reflection and autonomy. The author referred to critical

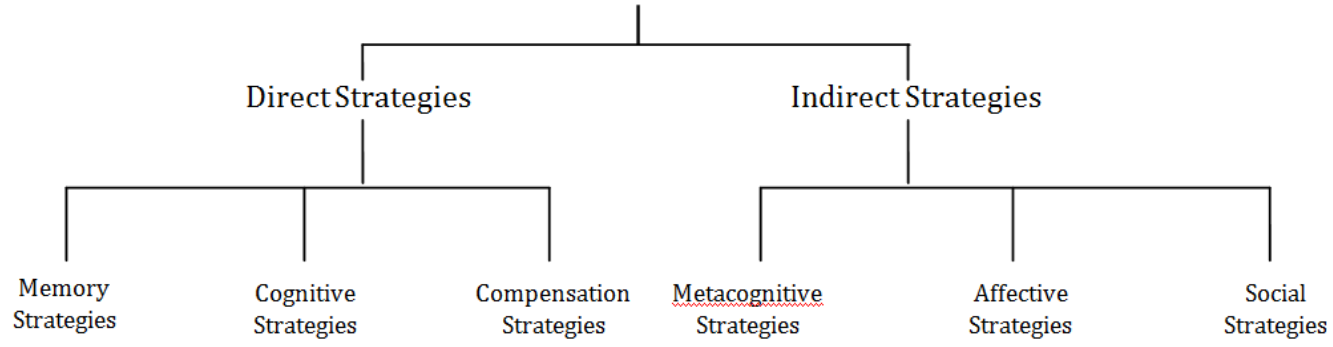

Figure 1. Diagram of the strategy system: Overview (Oxford, 1990, p.16)

reflection, metacognitive strategies, self-assessment, interaction and collaboration as the key criteria in automatization. She concluded that distance course materials make learners more autonomous.

Qingquan, Chatupote, and Teo (2008) investigated the difference in the frequency of language learning strategy use by successful and unsuccessful first-year university students in China. They concluded that successful students used a wider range of learning strategies for EFL learning, and used them significantly more frequently than unsuccessful students. Successful students used different kinds of strategies such as deep-L2-based, active participation, positive-attitude, learning-process monitoring strategies, whereas unsuccessful students used surface-based, word-level, rote-memory, and gesture strategies.

Dhanapala (2007) studied strategy use in different contexts by examining the learning strategy profiles of 101 Japanese and Sri Lankan advanced learners of English as foreign and second language. The findings of the study revealed significant differences between Japanese and Sri Lankan contexts with regard to overall strategy use. Language proficiency did not relate to learners' use of broad strategy categories as a whole, but there were certain individual strategy items which showed significant association with their proficiency measure. In addition, the learners' strategy choice and preference differed in the different cultural contexts.

Tseng, Dornyei, and Schmitt (2006) introduced a new approach to assessing vocabulary learning strategy use by learners: Self-regulated Capacity. They referred to underlying problems with two language learning strategy inventory questionnaire: Motivational Strategies for Learning questionnaire and Oxford Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). They concluded that the validity and reliability of Self-Regulating Capacity in vocabulary learning was satisfactory, and that the construct of self-regulated capacity can successfully be transferred to the field of second language learning.

Griffiths (2006) aimed to find the relationship between strategy development and language learning progression in 30 English language learners in New-Zeland over time. The results showed that most rapidly progressed students were those who reported greatest increase in the frequency of language learning strategy use over the period of the study.

Okamura (2006) examined how some writers succeed in English mastering scientific discourse in non-English speaking contexts by considering the Japanese researchers' difficulties when writing academic research articles and their strategies to cope with them. The results showed that a majority of the researchers preferred to simply cope with their limited English (subject knowledge-oriented) because of time constraints. However, the efforts to use language-oriented strategies would appear to pay off in the long run.

Based on what was mentioned above, it may be concluded that there are differences in competitive and cooperative learning contexts with regard to the teaching techniques, the kinds of feedback, and the learners' dependence on teachers and other classmates. The aim of this study is to see whether and to what extent these differences influence Iranian EFL learners' direct language learning strategy use.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the present study were a sample of 88 adult, male and female, EFL learners studying English for general purposes in Sohrevardi Nonprofit College in Qazvin. 44 students were in the competitive learning group and 44 in the cooperative learning group.

Instruments

To answer the research questions of the study, the Persian translation of a modified version of the subsection of Oxford's Strategy Inventory of Language Learning pertaining to direct strategy use with 29 strategy items on a 5-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'always' was used. The questionnaire was taken from Zarei and Elekai (2012) and translated by the researcher. The reliability index of the questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's alpha, and it turned out to be 0.68 It consisted of six broad categories: memory strategies for storing and retrieving new information of target language; cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the target language; compensation strategies for overcoming limitations of knowledge in target language; metacognitive strategies for coordinating the learning process; affective strategies for regulating emotions, motivation and attitudes; and social strategies for learning through interaction with others.

Procedure

To achieve the purpose of this study, the following procedure was followed:

First, in order to encourage the participants to answer the questions honestly and without anxiety, the participants were informed of the purposes of the study. Then, the questionnaires were given to the participants in two stages.

In the first stage, the autonomy and strategy questionnaires were given to all of the participants to capture their initial differences. In this stage, the participants had 45 minutes to answer the questions. If the participants had any questions, their questions were answered in Persian.

Then the participants were assigned to two groups. In the cooperative group, the participants were divided into groups of four or five members. They were given instructions through cooperative techniques including discussion, reciprocal teaching techniques, graphic-organizer and problem-solving. The participants of the other group were engaged in traditional, competitive activities in which the teacher explained the grammar

and presented the new words of the passage. Each student worked individually and answered the questions on the grammar section of the passage, and the teacher made corrections on their mistakes.
At the end of the instructional period, the autonomy and strategy questionnaires were administered again to measure the gain of the learners after the use of the competitive and cooperative teaching techniques. In this stage, 30 minutes were allocated for the questionnaires, and the researchers answered possible questions in Persian. The obtained data were then summarized and submitted to statistical analysis.

Data analysis

To analyze the data and to answer the research questions about the effects of competitive and cooperative learning techniques on direct language learning strategy use, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) procedure was used.

Result

This study attempted to see the effects of competitive and cooperative techniques on direct strategy use of Iranian adult EFL learners. To examine this effect, the ANCOVA procedure was used. Table 1 contains the results of descriptive statistics, and Table 2 presents the ANCOVA results on direct strategies.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on direct strategies

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Competitive group	95.48	15.557	44
Cooperative group	94.20	9.936	44
Total	94.84	12.993	88

As Table 2, shows there is no significant difference between the effects of competitive and cooperative teaching techniques on direct strategy use of Iranian EFL learners ($F_{(1, 87)}$ =.301, P>.05).

Discussion

The finding of the present study was that there was no significant difference between the effects of competitive and cooperative teaching techniques on direct strategy use of Iranian EFL learners. This finding is against that of Murphy (2008), who implies that learners in cooperative contexts use more strategies. Moreover, the finding of the present study is incompatible with that of Tinker Sachs, Candlin and Rose (2003), who reported that cooperative teaching techniques lead learners to use more strategies. Also, this finding is in conflict with the result obtained by Mandal (2009), who found that cooperative teaching techniques encourage learners to use more affective and social strategies, thus increasing strategy use.
The findings of the present study may have been affected by several variables including the following: As Dhanapla (2007) suggests, learners' strategy use and preference differs according to different teaching contexts. So, the findings of this study may have been affected by the teaching context. According to Radwan (2011), Rao (2006) and Sheory (1999), social and cultural factors affect learners' strategy use. So, these factors may also have influenced learners' strategy use. In addition, Radwan (2011) suggests that gender affects learners' strategy use. As this study did not consider gender as a variable, the findings may have been affected by the gender of the learners. Moreover, Qingquan, Chatupote and Teo (2008) and Griffths (2003) report that proficiency level affects EFL learners' strategy use. In this study, proficiency level was not a variable; therefore, the findings may have been affected by the proficiency level of the learners. Furthermore, learners at different age levels prefer different types of strategies. This study did not consider age as a variable. Therefore, the findings of the study may have been affected by the age of the participants. Moreover, while there were differences between the participants' performance on the post test, there were also significant differences in their pretest results. This implies that one cannot safely claim that the differences in the posttests were necessarily because of the effect of the treatment. Due to the uncertainties about the obtained result more replication studies are needed to shed light on the issue addressed in this study.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to investigate the effects of competitive and cooperative teaching techniques on direct strategy use of Iranian adult EFL learners. The finding of the study indicated that there was no

Table 2. ANCOVA results on direct strategy use

Source	Type II Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power[b]
Corrected Model	3261.95[a]	2	1630.97	12.13	.000	.222	.994
Intercept	13381.83	1	13381.83	99.55	.000	.539	1.000
Per-direct	3226.31	1	3226.31	24.00	.000	.220	.998
Group	40.42	1	40.42	.30	.585	.004	.084
Error	11425.81	85	134.42				
Total	806230.00	88					
Corrected Total	14687.77	87					
a. R Squared = .222 (Adjusted R Squared = .204)							
b. Computed using alpha = .05							

significance difference between competitive and cooperative teaching techniques on direct strategy use of Iranian EFL learners. Based on the finding, it may be concluded that teaching techniques do not have much to do with learners' strategy use. This means that if learners wish (or are expected) to use direct language learning strategies, they cannot do so simply by resorting to cooperative learning techniques. They may have to find alternative ways of improving their direct strategy use. Alternatively, if learners learn (or are taught) language in a competitive way on grounds that such a presentation technique will help boost learners' direct strategy use, this is no good excuse. Learners and teachers may freely opt for cooperative learning/teaching techniques without worrying about learners' strategy development. In short, the findings of this research may help teachers, learners and syllabus designers. The findings may help teachers to create rich and meaningful learning environments by providing students with cooperative activities that can benefit learners in multidimensional ways without fears of hindering their strategy development. Syllabus designers can also benefit from this study; if they come to learn about the nature of the relationship between competitive and cooperative techniques and learners' use of learning strategies, they will be able to make more informed decisions and better prepared to design course books which can encourage learners to tackle their job in more efficient, less laborious ways.

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