

Exploring the Gender Effect on EFL Learners' Learning Strategies

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Abstract—Various studies have discerned gender differences in language learning strategy (LLS) use. In most of the studies in which gender differences emerged, the results demonstrated that females reported using language learning strategies more often than males. However, some studies demonstrated that there was no statistically significant difference between genders in the use of LLS. Still others showed that male learners use more LLS than female learners do in certain taxonomy (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, the aim of present study was to investigate whether or not differences exist between female and male Iranian learners in the use of language learning strategies. A total of 149 learners at Institute in Tabriz, Iran participated in the study. Data were collected using a questionnaire adapted and modified from SILL (Oxford, 1990). The findings show that there is a significant gender difference in the use of language learning strategies as a whole. Female learners also have tendency to use overall language learning strategies more often than males. There are important differences between genders in the use of social/ affective strategies with females using them more often.

Index Terms—language learning strategy, gender

I. BACKGROUND

When examining the role of gender on the acquisition of language one must consider that there are numerous ways in which it can affect language use and development. Gender is a variable that can affect language use and acquisition as a result of biological, psychological effects, or socio-cultural influences differences between the two.

Bialystok (1979) Language learning strategies are believed to play a vital role in learning a second or foreign language, as they may assist learners in mastering the forms and functions required for reception or production in the second or foreign language and thus affect achievement (cited in Hashemi, 2012).

It involved the mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language (Nunan, 1999). Some of these strategies are performed individually; whereas others will be required the participant of other people.

In general, language learning strategy (LLS) is specific behavior or an action taken by the learner to facilitate acquisition, retention, retrieval, and performance (Rigney, 1978 cited in Ghani, 2003) which make the learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990).

Language learning strategies have been found to correlate with language proficiency and performance (Kamarul Shukri et al., 2008; O'Malley et al., 1985; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). Therefore, most educators now accept the assumption that the use of learning strategies has become guidepost for determination of high from low skilled learners (Brown et al., 1983). They have also begun to recognize the influence that learning strategy use may have on the acquisition of a second or foreign language (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Chamot, 1987; Cohen & Aphek, 1981; Hosenfeld, 1977; Wenden, 1991). They also acknowledge that learners can be taught to learn the language if they are also taught the strategies that facilitate language acquisition.

For a variety of reasons language, learning strategies are of great importance to language learning. Appropriate of LLSs can lead to higher achievement, more self-confidence on the part of learner, and greater autonomy. The special emphasis is placed on O'Malley and Chamott's (1990), Oxford's (1990), as well as Brown (2000) learning strategies taxonomies. Different researchers have classified language learning strategies into different categories the most general categorize are metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective strategies.

The LLS taxonomy contains three categories: a) Metacognitive strategies b) Cognitive strategies c) Social/affective strategies. Although different classifications of learning strategies have been proposed, the classification of O'Malley would be chosen as the basis of the present study. O'Malley's (1985) Classification of Language Learning Strategies Metacognitive Strategies can be stated that is a term to express executive function, strategies which require planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Among the main metacognitive strategies, it is possible to include advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, self-evaluation.

Cognitive strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and they involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery,

auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, inferencing are among the most important cognitive strategies.

Socioaffective Strategy as to the socio/affective strategies, it can be stated that they are related with social-mediating activity and transacting with others. Cooperation and question for clarification are the main socio/affective strategies (Brown 1987, pp.93-94).

In recent years, researchers have identified key areas of individual differences that can influence the choice and the frequency of LLS use (Chang, 2003; Griffiths, 2003; Kamarul Shukri et al., 2009; Lan, 2005; Macaro, 2001; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975). Considering the fact that language-learning strategies can promote language achievement and that knowledge about these strategies may progress instruction, it is important to study how learners use learning strategies.

Gender differences have been found in many areas of human social and cognitive development. Studies indicated that females show more interest in social activities than males, females are less competitive and more cooperative than males (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Research studies also claim that females are better than males both in second and first language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). In language learning strategy research, many studies across different cultures show more frequent strategy use by females than males, especially the social-based strategies (Oxford, 1995 & Mohamed Amin, 2000).

However, some findings revealed that males employed more strategies than females (Zamri, 2004), and some even suggested that there were no significant differences between males and females on their use of language learning strategies (Chang, 1990; Chou, 2002).

Politzer (1983) studied learning strategies of 90 undergraduate foreign language learners enrolled in French, Spanish and German courses in the U.S. and found that female learners used social learning strategies more often than males. After studying the LLS used by more than 1,200 undergraduate university learners, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) concluded that gender difference had a profound influence which indicates that females used strategies more frequently than males. Punithavalli (2003) with 170 ESL learners in Selangor, Malaysia found that female learners used greater strategies in and outside of classroom compared to the male learners. The results did not show a significant difference between male and female learners in using learning strategies for their examination. The study conducted by Nazali (1999) to find out the use of LLS among the secondary school learners who were learning Malay as a first language showed that females significantly surpassed males in their use of classroom strategies, and out of classroom strategies.

The result of Green and Oxford's (1995) study on 374 ESL/EFL showed that female learners used memory, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies more frequently than male learners. Chang (2003) investigated the use of LLS by a group of high school learners in Taiwan who were learning English. The study found that females significantly surpassed males in the use of LLS as a whole. The results also showed that females significantly used cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies more frequently than males. The results of Lan's (2005) study of 1,191 Taiwanese elementary school learners indicated a significant difference between boys and girls in the frequency of strategy use. Girls in this group reported to use significantly more strategy than boys. In the Malaysian context, Embi (2000) conducted a study to investigate the LLS of secondary school learners learning English. The result of his study indicated that females reported using overall LLS more frequently than male learners. The result also showed that females use more classroom and out of classroom strategies, and exam language strategies than males.

Oxford (1993,p.83) summarizes the gender related LLS research in the following manner: whenever strategy research has considered gender, it has usually demonstrated gender differences in strategy frequency, with females choosing to use particular sets of strategies more often than males. Females especially tended to use general study strategies, social strategies, affective strategies and certain conversational or functional practice strategies more frequently than males across a number of studies, usually showing a greater range of frequently used strategy categories. However, gender differences are not necessarily universal. For instance, Tran's (1988) study discovered that Vietnamese male immigrants to the U.S. used more strategies than did females. He claimed that employment situation may influence the use of strategies as well as gender. Wharton (2000) studied learning strategies of 678 university learners learning Japanese and French as foreign language in Singapore. Unexpectedly, the results showed that LLS were used significantly by males. Wharton (2000) speculated that when the subjects were very experienced second language learners, so gender difference in the use of strategies was not significant. Zamri's (2004) study in Malaysia also reported a similar result, as male learners used strategies more often than females when they were learning Malay language as a first language.

Existing research shows that motivation (Kaylani, 1996), cultural background (Oxford, 1996), attitudes and beliefs (Oxford et al 1990) and gender (Kaylani, 1996) are some of the factors which influence choice of strategies used among students learning a FL.

Bacon (1992) investigated strategies that learners used when listening to authentic second language texts of two levels of difficulty. She reported that women used a significantly higher proportion of metacognitive strategies than men. They were more likely to plan for the listening, monitor their comprehension and evaluate their strategy use than men. On the other hand, men reported more bottom-up strategies than women. Men also reported a significantly greater use of translation strategies than women. They appeared to be in more favor of cognitive strategies than metacognitive strategies. Some studies provided contradictory evidence regarding gender difference in language learning strategies use.

In research on EFL learners in Taiwan, Chou (2002) failed to find significant differences in the frequency of LLS use between male and female learners. The results of al Otaibi's (2004) study of 237 Saudi learners in an intensive English language program demonstrated that there were no statistically significant differences in the use any of the six strategy categories.

The findings thus far provided rich insights into interpreting the gender issues in the studies of LLS. However, since the results are inconclusive, further studies in different setting and learning conditions are deemed necessary. It is important to replicate LLS studies in different context in order to avoid what Wharton (2000) calls "the dangers of an ethnocentric bias regarding the definition of good language learning strategies". Moreover, it is difficult to find studies related to gender and LLS use among Iranian learners. The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the differences between male and female EFL learners in the use of overall language learning strategies?
2. What are the differences between male and female EFL learners in the use of three categories of language learning strategies?

II. METHODS

Participants

The present study was conducted at Zoha English Language Center. A total of 149 EFL learners, 47 are males and 143 are females, within the age range of 15-32. All participants were from elementary level to TOEFL level. These learners were considered as consistent learners of the center. They studied at Zoha Center during the Fall 2011 semester.

Instrument

A standard placement test of Oxford University and Cambridge University (2001, version 1) was used to divide the participants into elementary, intermediate, and advance proficiency levels. This instrument included 60 multiple-choice question, cloze comprehension passage, vocabulary, and grammar sections. In this study, the questionnaire consisted of 30 items, with the introduction of one construct and some changes to the original SILL version. In addition to the three strategy categories used in SILL (Cognitive, Metacognitive, Social/ Affective), we introduce a new category known as the Metaphysic strategy.

TABLE 1
INTERNAL CONSISTENCY RELIABILITY OF LLS QUESTIONNAIRE

Construct	Alpha Cronbach	Item
Cognitive Strategies	0.869	14
Metacognitive Strategies	0.859	09
Affective Strategies	0.650	07
Social Strategies	0.769	06

Table 1 summarizes the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of internal consistency for each category of the LLS questionnaires. The Cronbach's alpha for each category and for the entire questionnaire ranges from 0.65 to 0.869. This indicates a good degree of reliability (Sekaran, 1992; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

III. FINDINGS

In order to answer the research questions, SPSS software was used to analyze any significant differences in the use of language learning strategies between male and female learners. Therefore, first, descriptive statistics which includes mean and standard deviation, were used.

As can be seen in Table 2, there isn't a significant difference in the use of cognitive strategy among EFL language learners with different gender (Sig= .179, $P > 0.05$). Therefore, there is no significant difference in the use of cognitive strategy between male and female Iranian learners.

TABLE 2
THE EFFECT OF GENDER ON COGNITIVE STRATEGY USE (N= 149)

dependent variable	independent variable	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error mean	Cognitive strategy	t-test for Equality of Means		
							t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Cognitive strategy	Male	46	27.69	5.248	.77389	Equal variances assumed	-1.350	147	.179
	female	103	28.98	5.415	.53365	Equal variances not assumed	-1.367	89.08	.175

As can be seen on Table 3, t-test indicates that there isn't a significant difference in the use of metacognitive strategy among EFL language learners with different gender (Sig= .191; $P > 0.05$).

TABLE 3
THE EFFECT OF GENDER ON METACOGNITIVE STRATEGY USE (N= 148)

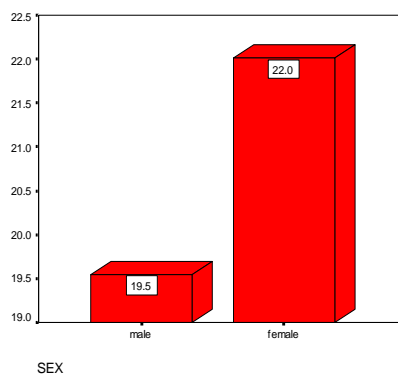
dependent variable	independent variable	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error mean	Meta cognitive strategy	t-test for Equality of Means		
							t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Meta cognitive strategy	Male	45	44.822	11.274	1.680	Equal variances assumed	-1.314	146	.191
	female	103	46.970	8.060	.7942	Equal variances not assumed	-1.156	64.460	.252

The results of T-Test for Table 4, indicates that there is a significant difference in the use of social/affective strategy among EFL learners with different gender. Hence, the data provides strong evidence to reject the third null hypothesis Sig= .010; $p < 0.05$).

TABLE 4
THE EFFECT OF GENDER ON SOCIAL/AFFECTIVE STRATEGY USE (N= 149)

dependent variable	independent variable	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error mean	Social/ affective strategy	t-test for Equality of Means		
							t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Social/ Affective strategy	Male	46	19.54	6.0468	.89156	Equal variances assumed	-2.613	147	.010
	female	103	22.00	4.969	.48966	Equal variances not assumed	-2.425	73.29	.018

In other words, the examination of the means for the variables reveals that females have significantly higher social/affective scores ($M = 22.0097$) than males ($M = 19.5435$). The findings suggest that although both male and female learners use all three strategy categories, but female learners tend to use social/affective strategies more than male learners. As Oxford (1993) believes, female learners tend to pay more attention to their feelings and this is quite consistent with this study. Oxford and Green (1995) in a study identified fourteen strategies that were used significantly more often by female learners. Out of these, one were social/affective strategies.



IV. DISCUSSION

In this paper, we tried to see whether there is any significant difference between male and female learners in their language learning strategies or not. Despite the limited scope of the study (Iranian EFL learners), it seems that male and female learners differ in the language learning strategies.

The findings of the relationship between gender and strategy use in the present study was consistent with former studies such as Green & Oxford, 1995; Mohamed Amin, 2000; Mohd Nazali, 1999; Punithavalli, 2003) in which female learners tended to use social/affective strategy more frequently than male learners.

Green and Oxford (1995) concluded that the effect of the use of LLS that are attributed to gender difference may originate from biological and socialization related causes. A close examination of the results of this study reveals that Iranian EFL learners use social/affective strategy more than other language learning strategies. The high use of social/affective strategies among Iranians is almost similar to that observed among learners from Asian countries like Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan as reported in some of the studies on Asian students (e.g., Sheorey, 1998; Oxford et al., 1990).

As suggested by Oxford (1989), the gender difference may have been associated with women's greater social orientation, stronger verbal skills, and greater conformity to norms, both linguistic and academic. Evidence from this study also supports the conclusion of second language acquisition studies that females are better than males both in second and first language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Slavin, 1988). Female learners also reported a greater use of social/affective strategies than male learners. One explanation for this finding might relate to the theories of psychology which mention that sensitivity, empathy, nurturance and emotion are strong

female traits, whereas aggression, dominance, assertiveness and emotional in expressiveness are male traits (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Therefore, these psychological traits of males and females may influence LLS use.

The present study verified that gender has been a rudimentary predictor in the fields of education, psychology, and linguistics research. The fact that male more than female students used social affective strategies, goes against Politzer's (1983 in Oxford et al. 1995) and Oxford et al.'s (1988 in Sunderland 1992) findings, which revealed that these strategies were used by the girls more than the boys. Politzer linked this with women's "stronger social orientation", and we could link our results with the fact that the girls may have been inhibited by their shyness and fear of speaking to the teacher, or in front of their classmates.

Therefore, teacher should determine the range of factors influencing strategy use among their learners. For instance, this study demonstrated that females might differ from males in their strategy choices and uses. The clarification of LLS based on such factor can provide a useful guidance for learners in order to become closer to successful language learners. The most important implication of this study is the need to provide students with further opportunities to use LLSs more frequently. It is a must for a language teacher today to familiarize the learners with the most common language learning strategies. O'Malley and Chamot introduce the following steps to strategy instruction:

... The teacher first identifies or shows students for their current language strategies, explains the rationale and application for using additional learning strategies, provides opportunities and materials for practice, and evaluate or assist students to evaluate their degree of success with new learning strategies. (1990, pp. 157-59).

The teacher's role in strategy training is an important one. The teacher should learn about the students, their interest, motivations, and learning styles. The teacher can learn what language learning strategies his/her students appear to be using by observing their behavior in class that is whether they cooperate with their peers or seem to have much contact outside of class with proficient foreign language users. Whether, they ask for clarification, verification or correction. Besides observing their behavior in class, the teacher can have adequate knowledge about the students, their goals, motivations, language learning strategies, and their understanding of the course to be taught. It is a fact that each learner within the same classroom may have different learning styles and varied awareness of the use of strategies. The language teacher should provide a wide range of learning strategies in order to fulfill different learning styles that meet the needs and expectations of his students who possessing different learning styles, motivations, strategy preferences, etc.

In addition to the students, the language teacher should also analyze his textbook to find out whether the textbook already includes language learning strategies or language learning strategies training. The language teacher should look for new texts or other teaching materials if language learning strategies are not already included within his materials. The language teacher should also study his own teaching method and overall classroom style. Analyzing his lesson plans, the language teacher can determine whether his lesson plans give learners chance to use a variety of learning styles and strategies or not. The teacher can see whether his teaching allows learners to approach the task at hand in different ways or not. The language teacher can also be aware of whether his strategy training is implicit, explicit, or both. It should be emphasized that questioning himself about what he plans to do before each lesson and evaluating his lesson plan after the lesson in terms of strategy training, the teacher can become better prepared to focus on language learning strategies and strategy training during the process of his teaching. Teacher should familiarize learners' awareness about LLS and their efficiency. Advanced learners' awareness about LLS can help them to become more self-confident and successful language learners. Learners should be informed that a wider range of LLS and higher frequency of their use are both fundamental in learning language efficiently. In another word, teachers should also encourage their learners not only to profit from strategies that they are already using, but also to develop their scope of LLS. In order to lead learners to utilize those strategies, language teachers need to create a sufficiently input environment inside and outside the classroom. For example, they should involve their learners a variety of communicative tasks. Thus, the role of a teacher should be modified as a facilitator, which encourages and motivates learners' active participation in the teaching and learning process.

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