Adult English Learners' Strategy Use in Iran: Four Generations in Focus

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating learning strategies of four different generations of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, twenty participants from four different generations were selected through purposive sampling. The participants had started learning English as a foreign language from 1973 onwards, with similarities and differences that provided insights into the functioning of their strategy use. The study used both qualitative (standard interviews and questionnaires) and quantitative (descriptive statistics) data to answer three questions about: (a) the most frequent strategy used; (b) the reason(s) for the popularity of such a strategy; and (c) historical determinants behind the differences observed. Results of the study revealed that memorization and rote learning'' was the most frequent strategy used by all participants belonging to the four different generations. In addition, the findings revealed that using the 'mother tongue pronunciation in order to memorize the materials' was the least frequent strategy used by the participants. Finally, in light of historical perspectives, some implications were suggested about the changing popularity of language learning strategies.
Keywords: EFL, learning strategies, cross-generational, interview-based studies

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (henceforth TEFL) is one of the most important fields of language study worldwide. With the growing pace of knowledge and technology, the need for communication in a globalizing world has been showing a sharply increasing trend. As a means for communication with other people around the world, many individuals tend to develop different skills of English such as listening and speaking, usually by taking language courses. To facilitate the development of such skills, many methods have been introduced. Grammar-translation, audio-lingual method, core repetition, and so on, are just some examples of second-language learning methods (Brown, 1980). Similarly, many strategies of second-language learning have been proposed which involve procedures that try to unfold learners' ways/styles of understanding and learning processes.

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An investigation into language learners' strategies requires researchers to consider a variety of practical and theoretical issues for identifying and addressing second-language learning problems. These strategies are usually intended to be used by classroom teachers working with adolescents or adults. In addition, they focus on learning styles and affective factors in learning strategies.

Understanding language learners' strategy use, from their own perspective rather than according to researchers' preconception, is essential for validly designed researches and pedagogical programs. A general assumption is that learners' strategies might be influenced by their cultural background. Considering this assumption, researchers are expected to gain empirical data from their respective cultural contexts. One of the problematic issues about the literature of Iranian learner strategies is the reliance on anecdotal descriptions or on Western constructs to investigate Iranian learners' strategy use, which is a shortcoming in terms of methodology.

In this paper, it is argued that a better understanding of Iranian learners' strategy use can be gained through accessing their own voices, and by analyzing findings in relation to the context, which is a historical context in this case. It is then tried to report on an interview-based study which investigates the strategy use of 20 English language learners from four "generations" of English language learns, since 1973 up to the present day.

More specifically, the present research aimed at interpreting the learners' strategy use in relation to the recent history of the education policy and practice within the Iranian context from 1973 up until now. This period was selected to include the most important historical and cultural turning point in contemporary history of Iran: the Islamic Revolution (1978). On this account, one generation before and three generations after the 1979 Revolution were studied in this research, with the purpose of answering the following questions:

1) What is the most common language learning strategy the Iranian EFL learners have relied on?

2) How can the popularity of these learning strategies be explained?

3) How can historical determinants help explain the popularity of the strategies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into brain lateralization (e.g., Knecht et al., 2000) has provided evidence for the hypotheses that left-handed people may reflect right-brain dominance, and that differences in hemisphere-related dominance could have implications about cognitive functioning. Considering such hypotheses, Mehrdad and Ahghar's (2012) tried to discover whether any differences related to the lateralization of brain functions could be reflected in learners' language learning-styles, which would ultimately lead to differences in learning-strategy use between left-handed and right-handed EFL students. To do this, some questionnaires including Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, and VAK Learning Styles Indicator, were administered among a sample of 100

EFL students (50 left-handers and 50 right-handers). The data collected were then analyzed in SPSS to find the patterns of difference and the significance of the differences, between left-handed and right-handed learners, in the areas of concern by the computation of cross-tab frequencies via chi-Square and independent samples t-test, respectively. Although the results of the data analysis showed no significant difference in brain dominance between right-handers and left-handers, the differences between the groups on certain aspects of learning styles, as well as learning strategies, were found to be statistically significant, suggesting a rather different cognitive processing in left-handed learners, compared to right-handed ones. This finding could bring about important implications for the educators, teachers, and syllabus designers.

Students learning strategies, as has been reported in some researches, have a powerful impact on the students' learning outcome. Sri Lengkanawati's (2004) study, for instance, focused on how learners from different cultural backgrounds learn a foreign language using their language learning strategies. In that research, two groups of students were collected: a sample of 56 students learning Indonesian as a foreign language at two universities in Australia, and 114 students learning English as a Foreign Language in a university in Indonesia. The research was designed to investigate the learners' language learning strategy differences from the perspective of their cultural backgrounds.

This research revealed some evidence for the existence of differences in the frequency of strategies used by both of the groups. Memory, meta-cognitive, and affective strategies were more frequently used by EFL students in Indonesia than by foreign language students in Australia. On the other hand, the use of cognitive, compensation, and social strategies was higher in Australians than in Indonesians. The data gathered from interviews showed differences in language learning strategies seemingly due to different cultural background of the students under study.

Riazi (2007) investigated the patterns of language learning strategy use among 120 female Arabic-speaking students majoring in English at a university in Qatar. Perceived strategy use was measured by the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, ESUEFL Student Version). The study found that this group of EFL learners scored "high" as strategy users with an overall mean of 3.46 out of 5. In addition, strategy categories were used in the order of meta-cognitive, cognitive, compensation, social, memory, and affective. The results showed that freshmen students reported the highest rate of strategy use with a mean of 3.64. Except compensation strategies, the results did not show any significant difference among the four educational levels regarding the use of strategy categories.

Despite the proliferation of recent research articles dealing with language learning strategies, ethnicity is a variable that has not received much attention in the literature. Japanese is a language that has not been targeted much in any investigation of language learning strategies (Ralph Grainger, 1997). In this regard, Ralph Grainger (1997) sought to remedy these deficiencies by presenting the result of an exploratory study seeking to identify the language learning strategies of learners of Japanese as a foreign language at a tertiary institution. It also sought to identify the most- and least-favored strategies of a

variety of ethnic groups, and to investigate the relationship between ethnicity and language-learning strategy preferences.

Griffiths (2003) conducted a study in a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand, investigating the relationship between course level and reported frequency of language learning strategy use by speakers of other languages. Employing the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, the Griffiths found a significant relationship between strategy use and course level with additional significant differences in strategy use and course level according to nationality. Strategies frequently used by higher-level students, in addition to the strategies frequently used by all students, were labeled "plus" strategies. These strategies were then grouped into several strategy types including those related to interaction with others, vocabulary, reading, the tolerance of ambiguity, language systems, the management of feelings, the management of learning, and the utilization of available resources. Issues of strategy teachability were also addressed with implications for the teaching/learning context. Considering these context-specific studies on learners' language development strategies, the present study tried to investigate the context of Iran.

METHOD

This study relied on both qualitative and quantitative data to answer the questions. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to closely represent the population required for this research. Simple descriptive statistics (presented in tables) presented the quantitative data about each participant's personal background. The qualitative data were collected through interviews which were designed to come up with an answer to the possibility of explanting the results from a historical perspective, by directly relying on the content and participants' reports.

Participants

First, 20 participants representing four different generations were selected to fill in the questions posed by the researchers. Then, analyzing the answers provided, the researchers tried to see what the most and the least frequent learning strategies were during the different eras in Iran. These learners were then divided into four generations in terms of their age and the year they started to learn English.

Data Collection Procedure

To collect data, two procedures were used: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The most commonly used research instrument in learner strategy research is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) survey instrument (Oxford, 1990). To collect data via this inventory, the participants were asked to answer the questioned contained as accurately as possible.

Apart from the questionnaires, the interviews were majorly concentrated on two categories: strategy use in English language learning and possible impacts on it. In fact, the interviews were supposed to focus the participants attention on *how* they had learned

English. In order to encourage diverse answers, relatively open questions were raised, as suggested by Cohen (2004) and Wengraf (2001). Generally speaking, the semi-structured interviews tended to be more flexible than the existing interview guides, and pre-planned questions were often used to adjust the conversation flow. It is important to note that age differences were assumed to have an impact on the nature of interviews. Each interview, averaging 30 minutes in length, was conducted in the participants' native language (Persian), enabling interviewees to express themselves openly (see Yang, 1999; Rao, 2002).

Data Analysis

The findings of the study were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics providing information including participant code, age, generation, gender, and year learning English began. To present the information, several tables were created, along with some argumentations made by the researchers. To classify the strategies that the participants had used in their personalized learning of English, Jiang and Smith's (2009) classification was used which involves five strategies (although the last one was adapted for the Iranian context): memorization and rote learning; understanding and memorization; memorization and the need for review; word association and memorization; use of Iranian pronunciation and memorization. These elements are described in more detail below.

RESULTS

As mentioned earlier, 20 Iranian EFL learners participated in this study. To consider the effects of contextual factors on language learning strategies, one generation before, as well as three generations after the most important cultural turn (Islamic revolution, 1979) in Modern Iran, were included in the study. First, some basic information on different issues related to the participants is presented here. These data are presented in four different tables. The reason for such a presentation was to classify the information related to each participant separately. Accordingly, Table 1 presents the data related to the first group of participants:

Table 1. Some Basic Information about the Participants of the Study: The First Generation

The First Generation of Iranian EFL Learners					
Participant Code	1	2	3	4	5
Age	52	57	53	52	51
Generation	1	1	1	1	1
Gender	M	M	M	F	F
Year Learning English Began	1974	1981	1975	1974	1975

Similarly, the second generation of Iranian EFL learners who participated in this study was as follows.

Table 2. Some Basic Information on the Participants of the Study: The Second Generation

The Second Generation of Iranian EFL Learners					
Participant Code	6	7	8	9	10
Age	42	44	47	45	43
Generation	2	2	2	2	2
Gender	M	F	F	M	F
Year Learning English Began	1989	1983	1985	1984	1986

Following the basic information about the second generation, the data relating to the third group of participants is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Some Basic Information on the Participants of the Study: The Third Generation

The Third Generation of Iranian EFL Learners					
Participant Code	11	12	13	14	15
Age	39	35	32	34	34
Generation	3	3	3	3	3
Gender	F	F	M	F	M
Year Learning English Began	1999	2002	2001	1996	1994

Finally, the fourth generation of Iranian EFL learners who participated in this study is shown in Table 4:

Table 4. Some Basic Information on the Participants of the Study: The Fourth Generation

The Fourth Generation of Iranian EFL Learners					
Participant Code	16	17	18	19	20
Age	23	25	24	22	24
Generation	4	4	4	4	4
Gender	F	F	M	F	M
Year Learning English Began	2009	1010	2010	2009	2011

All of the Tables (1-4) present direct information about the age of each participant when the study was conducted. In addition to the age of each participant, the generation each of the participants belonged was also taken into account. These generations ranged from 1 to 4, each representing a decade, starting from 1973. Similar, the gender of each participant was determined in each related table (M stands for Male and F for Female). Finally, the year each participant started to learn English as a foreign language is shown under each participant profile. It is important to note that each participant of the study was profiled and coded from 1 to 20 (each participant with a unique code).

The first step in collecting the data was to administer the questionnaires among the participants of the study. As mentioned earlier, a commonly used research instrument in learner strategy research is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) survey instrument (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, in this study, the adapted questionnaire was used to determine what learning strategies were dominantly used by the participants. In addition, some open-ended questions were also posed.

Primary descriptive statistics, along with qualitative data, revealed basic information about the interviewees' English learning experience, as well as their strategies in learning English as a Foreign Language. In a pilot study, Jiang and Smith (2009) categorized the most frequent language learning strategies applied by Chinese EFL learners. The categories are as followings:

1) **Memorization and Rote Learning:** following such a strategy, learners conduct a rote learning (learning through mere repetition) to learn the materials at hand. In the present study, 17 participants mentioned that they had actually learned English through this technique. Only three participants (Codes 3, 9 and 18) claimed that they had tried not to use this strategy. Rather, they maintained that other strategies, as opposed to mere repetition, would be more useful and thus justifying for them.

2) **Understanding and Memorization:** learners, following this strategy, first try to understand the materials being taught to them. Only when this process is fully accomplished, such learners memorize the materials (Jiang & Smith, 2009). For Marton et al. (1996), understanding is a deeper level of memorization and to aim at understanding facilitates memorization. As the results of the study revealed, 15 participants of the study found this technique useful, as well as mere memorization and rote learning. Only 5 participants (codes 2, 7, 14, 15 and 18) argued that this strategy was not fit for them. Rather, they would prefer other learning strategies such as the previous one (memorization and rote learning).

3) **Memorization and the Need for Review:** the learner first tries to memorize the materials being taught and then tends to reinforce those materials through reviewing them. As the findings of the study showed, only 8 participants agreed that they had often used this strategy to reinforce the previously learned materials in EFL classes. These included codes 2, 4, 7, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 20. These participants mostly believed that reinforcement after memorization could help them convey the gist of materials from the Short-Term Memory (STM) to their Long-Term Memory (LTM).

4) **Word Association and Memorization**: some of the participants mentioned word association and memorization as a dominant technique to learn English as a foreign language. These could include learning English through using word prefixes and suffixes, or synonyms and antonyms. These strategies might have been learned either from reference books or classroom teaching. In this regard, only 6 participants found this procedure useful (codes 2, 5, 9, 11, 13, and 17).

5) **Use of Iranian Pronunciation and Memorization:** The fifth learning strategy pointed out by Jiang and Smith (2009) was the use of Chinese pronunciation and memorization. This strategy was shifted in favor of Persian language, the language spoken in Iran and some other countries such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Relying on this technique, the learner simultaneously uses his/her mother tongue

pronunciation in order to better memorize the word in question. Only 3 participants in the present research (codes 2, 5, and 6) used this strategy.

DISCUSSION

In this section, following the results and findings of the study, different important issues related to this generation-based study are discussed. As mentioned earlier, there were two main factors which had significant effects on the results and findings of the study. These included the interviewees' personal observations, on the one hand, and the generation to which each participant belonged. To begin with, research questions are addressed here. The first question was as follows:

Q 1. What is the most common language learning strategy the Iranian EFL learners have relied on?

As the results of the study revealed, "memorization and rote learning" was the most frequent strategy used by the participants of the study. It is important to mention that the dominant role of the generation and age of the participants was not found to have had a significant effect on this strategy choice. The results of the study related to the use of the first strategy, i.e., memorization and rote learning, supported the findings of the study conducted by Jiang and Smith (2009). In that study, the researchers argued that a better understanding of Chinese learners' strategy use could be gained by accessing their own voices, and by analyzing findings in relation to context, in this case, historical context. At first glance, it is visible that the methodology used in this study was an adaptation taken from the study conducted by Jiang and Smith (2009). In that study, Jiang and Smith (2009) also reported on an interview-based study which investigated the strategy use of 13 English language learners from three generations of learning experience between 1973 and the present day. The results of that work confirmed that memorization was a popular learning strategy for these learners. However, its application was complex and diverse. As Jiang and Smith (2009) argued, language policy and related pedagogy might have important influences on the over-use of this strategy. The second research question was as follows:

Q 2. How can the popularity of these learning strategies be explained?

Students' learning strategies, as reported in some studies, have a powerful impact on the students learning outcome. In this regard, the findings of the study supported the one conducted by Sri Lengkanawati (2004) in Indonesia. In that study, the researcher tried to focus on how the learners from different cultural backgrounds learned a foreign language using their language learning strategies. The research was carried out involving a sample of 56 students at two universities in Australia learning Indonesian as a Foreign Language (IFL) and 114 students learning English as a Foreign Language in a university in Indonesia. The research was designed to investigate the learners' Language Learning Strategy differences from the perspective of their cultural backgrounds. It revealed some evidence for the differences in the degree of strategies used by both groups. Memory, meta-cognitive, and affective strategies were more frequently used by EFL students in

Indonesia than by IFL students in Australia. On the other hand, the use of cognitive, compensation, and social strategies was higher in Australia than in Indonesia. The data gathered from the interview showed differences in language learning strategies due to differences of their learning culture.

Having insight from similar studies conducted all around the world (especially in Asia), one could claim that the popularity of the learning strategies could be descriptively explained (see for example Jiang & Smith 2009; Karimnia & Salehi Zadeh 2007; Barani & Karimnia 2014; Sri Lengkanawati 2004, etc.). Finally, the third research hypothesis was as follows:

Q 3. How can historical determinants help explain the popularity of the strategies?

As the findings of the study showed, the method introduced helped the researchers understand how learners from different generations could benefit from the learning strategies available. As an example, the fifth culturally adapted learning method (use of Iranian pronunciation and memorization) introduced by Jiang and Smith (2009 was observed to be used mostly by participants of the first and second generations. These included codes of 2, 5, and 6.

Therefore, it could be stated that with the growing pace of knowledge and the developments introduced to the EFL teaching methodology, this strategy has been gradually neglected over time. Such an analysis could help understand why time, along with all of the changes it brings it itself, can be a factor that can influence learners' language development strategies.

CONCLUSION

As the results of the study showed, "memorization and rote learning" was the most frequent strategy used by the participants. This supported the results of other similar studies conducted around the world, including Jiang and Smith's (2009) research. Thus, it could be concluded that this strategy has not lost its fame and popularity over the period under study.

In addition, the results revealed that "using the mother tongue pronunciation in order to memorize or learn" the materials in a foreign language (e.g., English vocabularies) has lost its popularity over this period. This claim is made based on the fact that the participants which advocated this type of learning strategy basically belonged to the first and the second generations of the EFL learners.

Many studies have attempted to figure out what the most frequently used learning strategies are among learners of English as a foreign language (e.g., Jiang & Smith 2009; Riazi 2007; Sri Lengkanawati 2004; Ralph Grainger 1997; etc.). Overall, as Jiang and Smith (2009) explain, understanding language learners' strategy use from their own perspectives, rather than according to researchers' preconceptions, is essential for appropriate research and pedagogy. In fact, such an understanding could help researchers rely on first-hand and genuine results.

The present study focused on interpreting the learners' strategy use in relation to the recent history of educational policy and practice in the Iranian context from 1973 up to the present. The study could help discover what the most frequent learning strategies are, especially from the perspective of strategy survival over time. In addition, this period was considered for the purpose of the research to refer to the most important historical and cultural turning-point in the history of Modern Iran, namely the Islamic Revolution. Thus, one generation before and three generations after the 1979 Revolution were studied in the present work. Therefore, institutes' pedagogical staff, university professors, and students, along with those ordinary learners of English as a foreign language, were the participants to be addressed as the participants of the present study.

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