LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY USE ACROSS PROFICIENCY LEVELS

By

ABBAS ALI ZAREI * NOOSHIN BAHARESTANI **

* Associate professor, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin.
** MA, Islamic Azad University, Takestan.

ABSTRACT

To investigate the use of language learning strategies (LLS) by Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels, a total of 180 Iranian adult female EFL learners were selected and divided into three different proficiency level groups. To collect data, Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was used. One-way ANOVA procedures were used to analyze the obtained data. The results showed significant differences between the elementary level and the advanced level participants in their use of cognitive strategies, but the differences between the intermediate level group and the other two groups (elementary and advanced) were not significant. The same results were found in the participants' overall use of LLSs. However, in the use of the other five categories of LLSs across proficiency levels, no significant differences were found. The findings also showed that among the six learning strategies of SILL, cognitive strategies were the most frequently used strategy type followed by metacognitive strategies, and affective strategies were found to be the least frequently used type of LLSs.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies (cognitive, Memory, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, And Social Strategies), SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning), Proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

One of the basic concerns in the field of second language learning has always been finding more efficient ways for teachers or learners to facilitate language teaching and learning, and this has resulted in a great number of studies on the nature of language teaching and learning. Until 1970s, these studies were mostly based on teacher-oriented methodologies. Then, it was argued that some language learners seemed to be 'more successful' regardless of teaching methods and techniques (Rubin, 1975). Rubin (1975, p. 41) suggests that "if all people can learn their first language easily and well, why does this ability seem to decline for some when second language learning is the task?". These studies resulted in a shift of focus from teachers and teaching methods to learners and learning process, leading to a great amount of research aimed at investigating learner variables.

One of the variables receiving considerable attention is language learning strategies (LLSs). One of the important features of LLSs that distinguishes them from other learner variables is that learning strategies can be readily taught (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). In Cotterall's (2000) point of view, selecting learning strategies is one of the means of transferring responsibility from the teacher to the learner in language courses which attempt to promote learner autonomy.

Many studies have investigated the effects of various variables on the use and choice of LLSs. Oxford (1989) mentions several factors influencing learners' choice of LLSs including the language being learned, duration, age, sex, personality characteristics, career orientation, learning style, motivational orientation, teaching methods, and so on.

The present study focuses on the effects of Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level on their use of LLSs. More specifically, it attempts to answer the following question:

1. Are there any significant differences in the overall strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels?
2. Are there any significant differences in the cognitive strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels?

3. Are there any significant differences in the metacognitive strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels?
4. Are there any significant differences in the affective strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels?
5. Are there any significant differences in the memory strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels?
6. Are there any significant differences in the compensation strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels?
7. Are there any significant differences in the social strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels?

1. Review of the Literature

Learners' role in the learning process has been recognized by many researchers since the 1970s, and this has resulted in a great number of studies on the potential effects which LLSs may have on learning (e.g., Griffiths, 2003; Hallbach, 2000; Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1989, 1990; Paribakht, 1985; Phakiti, 2003; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Stern, 1992; Vann & Abraham, 1990). Rubin (1975) emphasizes, the significant effect of LLSs used by more successful learners on enhancing their learning. Oxford (1990) defines, LLSs as "specific actions taken by the leaner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p.8). She suggests that using appropriate LLSs improves learners' proficiency and leads to greater self-confidence. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) emphasize, the role of learning strategies as a means of processing information in learning a language. Cohen (2003), describes language learning strategies as both the conscious or semi-conscious thoughts and behaviours that learners employ to enhance their understanding of a target language.

LLSs have been investigated by several researchers and different categorizations have been offered by Rubin (1987), Oxford (1990), Stern (1992), and others. For instance, O'Malley, et al. (1985) classified language learning strategies into three main categories: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and socioaffective strategies. Oxford (1990) Classified, LLSs into two broad categories of direct and indirect strategies with six subscales of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

In Hsiao and Oxford's (2002) study, Oxford's six-factor strategy taxonomy was found to be the most consistent with learners' strategy use. A number of early studies in the field of LLSs were based on observations (e.g., O'Malley, et al., 1985) in which researchers could only rely on observable behaviors of learners such as note taking, but unobservable strategies like reasoning or analyzing could not be determined (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). In most of the more recent studies, learners have been asked to report on their LLS use, using different self-report methods, such as interviews, written diaries and journals, questionnaires, and think aloud protocols. Among the above-mentioned methods, questionnaires are the most widely used instruments (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

The choice and use of LLSs can be affected by many factors. Oxford (1989) mentions some factors that influence learning strategy choice, such as "the languages being learned; degree of awareness; learning style; aptitude; career orientation; language teaching methods; task requirements; affective variables such as attitudes, motivation level/intensity, language learning goals, motivational orientation, personality characteristics, and general personality type; age, sex, national Origin, and duration" (p. 236). Many studies have been carried out to investigate the effects of different factors on LLS use. For Instance, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) investigated, the relationship between adult language learning styles and LLS use and explained how the learners' preferred LLSs associated with their psychological types. Wharton (2000), in his study with two groups of learners learning Japanese and French languages, found that the language studied was one of the main factors influencing the learners' use of strategies, after self-rated proficiency. In another study undertaken in Botswana, between 2002 and 2005 by Magogwe and Oliver (2007), the relationship between language strategies, proficiency, age and self-efficacy

beliefs was examined and a dynamic relationship between the use of the LLSs and proficiency, level of schooling and self-efficacy beliefs was reported, with no distinct preference for particular types of strategies. McMullen (2009) investigated, the effects of gender and academic major on the use of LLSs of 165 learners. The findings showed that females used LLSs slightly more than males. Moreover, academic majors were found to affect LLS use of the students. Fewel (2010), comparing the differences in learners' LLS use and their proficiency levels, indicated the possible effect of the LLSs selected by learners on determining their success or failure in language learning. Shukri Mat Teh, et al. (2009) investigated gender differences among Arabic students at several secondary schools in Malaysia, and reported significant gender differences in the overall use of LLSs, with females using them more often than males. In another study, Kaur and Embi (2011) investigated the relationship between LLS use and gender among primary school students and discovered more frequent overall use of LLSs by females than males. Božinovic and Sindik (2011) found more frequent use of all types of strategies by females in comparison with males.

There have also been a number of empirical studies that have investigated the relationships between learners' L2 proficiency and strategy use. For instance, in a study of English learners in Puerto Rico, Green and Oxford (1995) showed that more successful learners used strategies more frequently, and naturalistically than the less successful learners. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) reported the significant effect of language proficiency on strategy use in the large-scale investigation of 1,200 university foreign language students in the US. Similarly, Park (1997) reported a positive relationship between LLS use and proficiency level. In another study, Griffiths' (2003) reported similar results. Similarly, Khalil (2005) found that proficiency and gender affected the overall strategy use of learners in Palestine. The results of Su's (2005) study showed a positive correlation between the participants' LLS use and their self-perceived proficiency levels, both in the overall use and the use of all six types of LLSs. In a similar study, Ouyang (2011) reported significant correlation between memory, cognitive, compensation, and social strategy categories and proficiency level. Similarly, the results of a study by Wu (2008) revealed more use of LLSs by high proficiency learners, especially cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Alhaisoni (2012) reported more use of all types of strategies by more proficient learners. And a significant difference between high and low language proficiency level learners in their use of LLSs was reported by Weng (2012).

However, the findings of a study carried out by Hong-Nam and Leavell's (2006) revealed that the intermediate level learners used more overall strategies than the beginners or advanced learners. In another study, Salem (2006) found no significant differences in the use of LLSs between the low and high proficient learners, except for metacognitive strategies in favor of the high proficient learners. In a different study, Ismail and Al Khatib (2013) found that proficiency level had no significant effect on the use of strategies.

There have also been a number of studies on the relationship between LLS use and proficiency level in Iran, but they have shown mixed results. For instance, Akbari and Talebinezhad (2003) investigated the use of LLSs across proficiency levels, and found a positive relationship between their proficiency and use of LLSs. In another study, Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif, (2008) examined the use of LLSs across proficiency levels and found that proficiency level was the main predictor of LLS use. Khabiri and Azaminejad (2009) studied the relationship between the use of LLSs and self-perceived language proficiency at intermediate and advanced levels. The results showed that the relationship between the advanced level learners' use of LLSs and their self-perceived proficiency was significant and cognitive strategies were found to be the most and affective strategies the least frequently used type of strategies. Tajeddin and Alemi (2010) compared less proficient and more proficient L2 learners' preferences for L1-based, L2-based, and non-linguistic compensation strategies. The results did not show a significant difference between the high and low proficient learners in their overall use of compensation strategies; however, the effect of proficiency on individual strategies led to more l2-based strategies used by high proficient learners in contrast with

avoidance or L1-based strategies used by low proficient learners. Kashefian-Naeeini and Maarof (2010) investigated the effects of gender, year of study and father's level of education on the type and frequency of LLS use and reported that gender and father's level of education had no significant effect on the use of LLSs. A positive relationship was found between years of study and use and choice of LLSs. In a different study, Ghavamnia, Kassaian, and Dabaghi (2011) reported a positive relationship between English proficiency and the use of LLSs. Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012) also reported a positive relationship between proficiency levels of the learners and their use of LLSs. Zarafshan and Ardeshiri (2012) investigated the relationships of emotional intelligence and the use of LLS use with Iranian EFL university students' proficiency levels and found a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and English proficiency of the participants, but the relationship between the use of LLSs and their proficiency levels was reported to be positive. They also reported metacognitive strategies to be the most frequent strategies followed by affective strategies, and social strategies the least.

Ansarin, Zohrabi and Zeynali (2012) found that the learners at advanced proficiency level had larger vocabulary size and used LLSs more than the other learners. Salahshour, Sharif, and Salahshour (2013) examined the effects of gender and proficiency level on Iranian EFL learners' choice of LLSs and frequency of their use and discovered that the higher proficiency level learners tended to use all types of strategies more frequently than the learners of lower proficiency level. The most frequently used types of LLSs used by them were metacognitive strategies followed by social strategies, and the least frequent type was affective strategies. In another study, Azimi Mahammad Abadi and Baradaran (2013) found a positive relationship between the use of vocabulary learning strategies and learner autonomy in both intermediate and advanced levels, but the relationship was stronger in advanced learners. Zarei and Shahidi Pour (2013) investigated the use of different types of LLSs as predictors of L2 idioms comprehension and reported that cognitive and affective learning strategies were the most frequently used strategies by successful idiom learners, and the best predictors of L2 idioms comprehension.

However, there are studies that have yielded different and to some extent contradictory results from the above mentioned studies, regarding the effects of proficiency on learners' use and choice of LLSs. For instance, Borzabadi (2000) investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and field of study, sex, language proficiency and learning styles, and reported that English students were significantly better in the use of strategies, but no significant relationship were found between the use of LLSs and language proficiency, sex, and learning styles. In a study on the relationship between the use of LLSs and variables such as motivation, sex and the level of proficiency, Ziahosseini and Salehi (2007) reported that proficiency level did not make any difference in the use and choice of LLSs. Khosravi (2012) investigated the effect of learners' proficiency level on LLS use of Iranian EFL learners and found no significant differences in the frequency of general LLS use between the higher and lower level learners; the use of cognitive strategies showed the strongest relationship with English proficiency. Similarly, Ketabi and Mohammadi (2012) studied the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' LLS use and their language proficiency and found no significant differences in learners' LLS use across proficiency levels. It was also found that cognitive strategies were the main predictors of language proficiency.

On the whole, although a large number of studies have been conducted on the relationship between language learners' proficiency levels and their use of LLSs, the results seem to be mixed. The purpose of this study is to shed light on this issue and investigate if there are any differences in the use of different types of strategies across proficiency levels.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 180 Iranian adult language learners whose native language was Persian. They had enrolled in EFL classes during the winter 2013 and spring 2014 semesters in two different branches of Kish Language Institute in Tehran.

2.2. Instrumentation

In the present study, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), developed by Oxford (1990), was used to elicit information about the participants' LLS use. SILL is a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5. It has two versions: an 80-item version for English speakers learning a foreign language, and a 50-item version for learners of English as a second or foreign language. The 50-item version of SILL which was used in this study includes the following six parts:

- Part A: Memory strategies (9 items)
- Part B: Cognitive strategies (14 items)
- Part C: Compensation strategies (6 items)
- Part D: Metacognitive strategies (9 items)
- Part E: Affective strategies (6 items)
- Part F: Social strategies (6 items)

To put the respondents at ease, facilitate datacollection, and eliminate any possible ambiguities, a Persian translation of SILL by Borzabadi (2000) was used in this study. To estimate the reliability, the internal consistency of the Persian version of the SILL was checked using Cronbach's alpha, which turned out to be .89.

2.3. Procedure

To collect data, the SILL questionnaire was given to the participants, and they were asked to mark one of the choices available to them (always or almost always, generally, sometimes, generally not, never or almost never) according to the frequency with which they used each strategy. Initially, the number of participants was 202. Based on their course levels, they were divided into three different proficiency levels, namely elementary, intermediate, and advanced. After collecting the data and examining them for any missing information, eight of the participants were excluded from the study as they had failed to respond to all the statements. Besides, to have a balanced design, four questionnaires from the elementary group, nine from the intermediate, and one from the advanced group were randomly discarded. Therefore, each group consisted of 60 students. To investigate the effect of proficiency level on overall strategy use of the participants and to verify the research hypotheses and answer the research questions, seven separate one-way ANOVA procedures were used to analyze the collected data.

3. Results

3.1. Overall strategy use across proficiency levels

To investigate the effect of proficiency level on overall strategy use of the participants, a one-way ANOVA procedure was run. Table 1 presents descriptive and test statistics.

As it can be seen in the table, the advanced level group has the highest mean followed by the intermediate level and the elementary level groups. Meanwhile, since the significance value is less than .05 and the F-value is statistically significant ($F_{(2,\ 177)} = 3.630$, $p < .05$), it can be concluded that there are significant differences among the means of the three proficiency levels regarding their overall strategy use. Moreover, the omega squared index of the strength of association ($\omega^2 = .02$) indicates that 2% of the total variance in the dependent variable (overall strategy use) is accounted for by the independent variable (proficiency level). This means that the remaining 98% of variance is left unaccounted for. To locate the differences among the means, a post-hoc Scheffe test procedure was run, which yielded the following results.

A look at Table 2 makes, it clear that the differences between the intermediate level group and the other two groups are not statistically significant. But, there is a significant difference between the elementary level and the advanced level groups. This means that the advanced

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	60	162.18E2	21.37438	156.6617	167.7049
intermediate	60	167.83E2	15.82978	163.7441	171.9226
Advanced	60	172.48E2	24.73760	166.0929	178.8737
Total	180	167.50E2	21.27723	164.3705	170.6295
		F = 3.630	Sig. = .029	ω2 = .02	

Table 1. Descriptive and test statistics for the ANOVA on overall strategies

(I) proficiency	(J) proficiency	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	Intermediate	-5.65000	3.828	.339	-15.1019	3.8019
Elementary	Advanced	-10.30000	3.828	.029	-19.7519	.-8481
intermediate	Advanced	-4.65000	3.828	.480	-14.1019	4.8019

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 2. Multiple comparisons of means for overall strategy use

level participants have outperformed their counterparts in their overall strategy use.

3.2. Cognitive strategy use across proficiency levels

To investigate if there are any significant differences in the cognitive strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels, a one-way ANOVA procedure was used. Table 3 summarizes descriptive and test statistics.

As Table 3 shows, the advanced level group has the highest mean, followed by the intermediate level and the elementary level groups. In addition, since the significance level is less than .05 and the F-value is statistically significant ($F_{(2,177)} = 6.97$, $p < .05$), it can be concluded that there are significant differences among the means of the three proficiency levels regarding cognitive strategy use. Moreover, the index of the strength of association ($\omega^2 = .06$) indicates that 6% of the total variance in the dependent variable (cognitive strategy use) is accounted for by the independent variable (proficiency level). To locate the differences among the means, a post-hoc Scheffe test procedure was run, which yielded the following results.

A look at Table 4 makes it clear that the differences between the intermediate level group and the other two groups are not statistically significant. But, there is a significant difference between the elementary level and the advanced level groups. This means that the advanced level participants have outperformed their elementary level counterparts in their use of cognitive strategies.

3.3. Mea-cognitive strategy use across proficiency levels

To investigate metacognitive strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels, another one-way ANOVA procedure was run, the results of which are given in Table 5.

As Table 5 shows, the F-value and the significance level significant ($F_{(2,177)} = 2.924$, $p > .05$) show that there are no significant differences among the means of the three proficiency levels regarding their preferences for metacognitive strategy use.

3.4. Affective strategy use across proficiency levels

To investigate affective strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels, another one-way ANOVA procedure was used, yielding the following results:

As it can be seen in Table 6, the significance level and the F-value ($F_{(2, 177)} = 1.671$, $p > .05$), indicate no significant differences among the means of the three proficiency levels in their choice of affective strategies.

3.5. Memory strategy use across proficiency levels

To see whether or not there are any significant differences in the memory strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels, another ANOVA procedure was used. Table 7 summarizes the results.

Based on Table 7, the significance level and the F-value ($F_{(2,}$

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	60	42.4833	7.27077	40.6051	44.3616
intermediate	60	44.6667	6.48248	42.9921	46.3413
Advanced	60	47.7167	9.13568	45.3567	50.0767
		F = 6.974	Sig. = .001	ω2 = .06	

Table 3. Descriptive and test statistics for the ANOVA on Cognitive strategies

(I) proficiency	(J) proficiency	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	Intermediate	-2.18333	1.407	.303	-5.6584	1.2917
Elementary	Advanced	-5.23333	-1.407	.001	-8.7084	-1.7583
intermediate	Advanced	-3.05000	1.407	.099	-6.5251	.4251

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4. Multiple comparisons on cognitive strategies

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	60	32.4167	6.21723	30.8106	34.0227
intermediate	60	34.5667	4.43548	33.4209	35.7125
Advanced	60	34.6167	6.22758	33.0079	36.2254
		F = 2.924	Sig. = .056		

Table 5. Descriptive and test statistics for the ANOVA on Metacognitive strategies

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	60	18.5500	3.06663	17.7578	19.3422
intermediate	60	18.7167	3.02022	17.9365	19.4969
Advanced	60	19.6333	4.25846	18.5333	20.7334
		F = 1.671	Sig. = .191		

Table 6. Descriptive and test statistics for the ANOVA on affective strategies

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	60	26.8333	4.59243	25.6470	28.0197
intermediate	60	26.0667	4.22610	24.9750	27.1584
Advanced	60	27.7000	5.41592	26.3009	29.0991
		F = 1.76	Sig. = .175		

Table 7. Descriptive and test statistics for the ANOVA on Memory strategies

$_{177)}$ = 1.760, p > .05) are indicative of no significant differences among the means of the three proficiency levels regarding their use of memory strategies.

3.6. Compensation strategy use across proficiency levels

To investigate compensation strategy use across proficiency levels, another ANOVA procedure was used. The results are presented in Table 8.

As it can be seen in Table 8, the significance level and the F-value (F ($_{2,\ 177)}$ = .606, p > .05) indicate no significant differences among the means of the three proficiency level groups regarding their use of compensation strategies.

3.7. Social strategy use across proficiency levels

The last question sought to investigate whether or not there are any significant differences in the social strategy use of Iranian EFL learners across proficiency levels. Table 9 summarizes the results of the one-way ANOVA used for this purpose.

Based on Table 9, the significance level and the F-value (F ($_{2,\ 177)}$ = .1.454, p > .05) show no significant differences among the means of the three proficiency level groups regarding their use of social strategies.

3.8. Discussion

One of the findings, regarding the overall strategy use of the participants, was that although the differences between the intermediate level learners and the other two groups in their overall use of LLSs were not significant, there was a significant difference between the advanced level and elementary level groups, indicating a relationship between LLS use and language proficiency. This finding is in line with those of a number of studies in that more proficient learners were reported to make more overall use of LLSs (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1989; Griffiths, 2003; Kalil, 2005). The finding also provides support for what Rahimi, Riazi and Saif (2008) found, a linear relationship between proficiency level and overall strategy use; they also reported cognitive and metacognitive strategies to be more strongly related to proficiency level than the other categories of LLSs.

Another finding of this study was that cognitive strategies were significantly related to English proficiency. Regarding more use of cognitive strategies by the participants, especially by advanced level learners, the finding accords with that of O'Malley, et al. (1985) indicating more regular use of cognitive strategies than metacognitive strategies by language learners. This finding also corroborates that of Oxford (1990), who suggests that cognitive strategies are the most popular strategies among language learners.

The results of the present study also showed that the other five hypotheses regarding metacognitive, social, compensation, memory and affective strategies, were supported, and there was no significant difference in their use across proficiency levels. These results are partly similar to that of Akbari and Talebnejad (2003), who reported no significant statistical differences in the use of memory, affective and social strategies across proficiency levels. But the results are different in that in their study, compensatory strategies were found to be the most important predictor of L2 proficiency. The results of this study also seem to be similar to those of Salem (2006), who found no significant differences in the use of LLSs across proficiency levels. But the results differ in that Salem reported metacognitive strategies as the only type of strategies related to proficiency level. The findings also support those of Ghavamnia, Kassaian, and Dabaghi (2011), who found a positive correlation between proficiency level and LLS use. Moreover, the findings of the present study lend strong support to those of Khosravi (2012), who reported cognitive strategies to have the strongest relation to English proficiency, and found no significant differences in the use

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	60	19.3833	3.91906	18.3709	20.3957
intermediate	60	20.0667	3.36919	19.1963	20.9370
Advanced	60	19.5167	3.50540	18.6111	20.4222
		F = 1.671	Sig. = .191		

Table 8. Descriptive and test statistics for the ANOVA on Compensation strategies

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Elementary	60	22.5167	4.09005	21.4601	23.5732
intermediate	60	23.7500	3.63889	22.8100	24.6900
Advanced	60	23.3000	4.27170	22.1965	24.4035
		F = 1.671	Sig. = .191		

Table 9. Descriptive and test statistics for the ANOVA on Social strategies

of LLSs between the elementary and intermediate level groups. The difference between Khosravi's study and the present study is that she did not include advanced level learners' use of LLSs in her study. Similarly, these results provide further confirmation for the findings of Ketabi and Mohammadi (2012), reporting positive relationship between LLS use and English proficiency and indicating cognitive strategies as the best predictors of language proficiency. Their results also showed no significant relationship between language proficiency and the other five categories of LLSs, which is in line with what this study reported. Zarei and Shahidi Pour's (2013) findings also seem to be partly corroborated by the results of this study in that they reported cognitive strategies as the most commonly used strategies by successful idiom learners. Their findings differs from those of the present study in that they discovered affective strategies as the second most frequently used type of strategy.

Similarly, the findings of the present study contradict Hong-Nam and Leavell's (2006) findings in which intermediate level learners were reported to make more overall use of strategies than the beginners or advanced language learners. In addition, the findings of this study partly contradict those of Ziahosseini and Salehi (2007), in that the level of proficiency was reported to make no difference in the use and choice of strategies, and that proficiency level had no significant correlation with cognitive strategies. Meanwhile, their results indicating no significant differences in the use of the other five categories of LLSs across proficiency levels are supported by this study. The findings of the present study are also different from those of Alhaisoni (2012), who discovered significantly more frequent use of all six types of LLSs by more proficient learners.

There may be a number of factors accounting for the discrepancy between the findings of the present study and those of the above mentioned studies. One possible reason could be that the present study did not consider the gender of the participants, and all participants were female. In a number of studies, the prominent role of gender differences in the use of language learning strategies has been emphasized (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995; Salem, 2006). Therefore, if males were included, the study may have produced different results. Another possible reason could have been the wide range of the participants' age, 15 to 49, and this may have caused some other factors to affect the results of this study, such as learners' career, attitudes, motivation, learning goals, general personality type, social factors, and so on. Further research is needed to resolve these issues. On the other hand, adult learners usually prefer to reason out (Oxford, 1990), and since the participants of the present study were adult language learners, their preferences to use cognitive strategies that involve a great deal of reasoning and analyzing the new language may be justified. Another possible reason for the observed discrepancy between the findings of the present study and some of the above-mentioned studies may be the learners' cultural and social differences. The participants of this study were Iranian EFL learners who had been trained in Iranian educational system, which is still teacher-centered and mostly grammar-based, and in which a great deal of focus is still on reading, grammar and translation. (Dolati & Seliman, 2011). Thus, Iranian EFL learners are often encouraged to use techniques such as formal practice with sounds and writing systems, repeating, note taking, summarizing, highlighting, translating, analyzing contrastively across languages, and recognizing formulas and patterns, which have been classified as cognitive strategies by Oxford (1990). Moreover, students' feelings do not seem to be a matter of great concern in educational settings. Meanwhile, learners themselves do not seem to be aware of the importance of affective learning strategies such as using progressive relaxation; deep breathing; making positive statements; discussing feelings with others; taking risks, and so on in enhancing their learning (Oxford, 1990). As Zarei and Shahidi Pour (2013) suggest, in Iranian educational system cognitive and metacognitive learning processes are more focused on at the expense of the affective and interpersonal factors involved in the learning process.

Conclusion

Although the findings of the present study showed no significant differences in the Iranian EFL learners' use of five

categories of LLSs (memory, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective strategies) across proficiency levels, significant differences were found between elementary and advanced level learners in their overall and cognitive strategy use. Therefore, based on these findings, it can be concluded that among the six categories of SILL, cognitive strategies may be one of the predictors of Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency. These findings also confirm the importance of LLS use in promoting language learning and language proficiency. Iranian EFL learners' preference for cognitive strategies may be rooted in the way they have been trained in Iranian educational system. In Iranian educational system, cognitive strategies such as repeating, translating, formal practicing with sounds and writing systems, note taking, summarizing, highlighting, analyzing contrastively between their native language and the language being learnt, and so on seem to be more emphasized. Thus, Iranian EFL learners seem to be more accustomed to using them, and this may explain Iranian learners' inclination to use cognitive strategies, and the positive relationship between their use of cognitive strategies and EFL proficiency in the present study. The results may also indicate that although Iranian learners use some other types of strategies such as social, metacognitive, compensation and memory strategies, they may not be using them consciously, may not be aware of their importance, or may not be given opportunities to use them more frequently inside and outside of classrooms. This seems to be even worse when it comes to affective strategies, which have been reported to have the least frequency among all strategy types. Iranian EFL learners may not be aware of the existence of such strategies and the effects of these strategies on controlling their emotions while learning or using a new language. This may be due to lack of training in affective strategies, or neglecting the affective dimension of the learners in Iranian educational system (Akbari & Talebinejad, 2003).

In short, the findings of the present study supported the results of the earlier studies indicating the significant relationship between LLS use and language proficiency, and the crucial role that cognitive strategies play in improving language proficiency. Therefore, it can be concluded that since cognitive strategies have been shown to be related to language proficiency, more emphasis on using a larger variety of such strategies, alongside the ones already used by learners, may lead to more improvement in their proficiency. However, there seems to be a need for training Iranian EFL learners in the use of other types of LLSs, especially affective ones, so that their awareness of a larger number of strategies enables them to choose from a wider range of strategies and use them based on their own needs. As Chamot (2004) suggests, language learners should examine a variety of strategies until they could eventually select their own set of effective strategies.

The findings of the present study may have implications for learners, teachers, and material developers. The findings may have significant implications for curriculum developers in that they may design programmes for teachers to train on how LLS instruction should be conducted. As Martinez (1996) suggests, in order to design an effective LLS training, teachers should know how to identify and assess their students' strategies first, then offer them a large number of strategies, and let their students make their own set of strategies based their needs, interests, personality types, cognitive styles, and so on. Syllabus designers and school authorities may also allocate some time to integrate LLS instruction into class instructions, as in most schools and institutes in Iran, teachers are bound to follow a fixed syllabus, and a little flexibility and adjustment may facilitate the process.

The findings may also help materials developers to consider the importance of language learning strategies while planning textbooks and materials. Since cognitive strategies are found to be significantly related to language proficiency, materials developers can provide learners with materials that consist of activities that stimulate the use of this as well as other types of strategies.

These findings can have implications for learners as well. If they become aware of the significance of LLSs in improving their language learning, they will be encouraged and motivated to use a wider variety of appropriate strategies and become more successful in learning the new language.

References

[1]. Akbari, R., & Talebinezhad, M. R. (2003). "The relationship between the use of language learning strategies by Iranian learners of English, their foreign language proficiency, and the learners' IQ scores". *(IJAL) International Journal of Automation and Logistics*, Vol.6(1), pp.1- 20.

[2]. Alhaisoni, E. (2012). "Language learning strategy use of Saudi EFL students in an intensive English learning context". *Asian Social Science*, Vol.8(13), pp.115-127.

[3]. Ansarin, A. A., Zohrabi, M., & Zeynali, S. (2012). "Language learning strategies and vocabulary size of Iranian EFL learners". *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol.2(9), pp.1841-1848.

[4]. Azimi Mohammad Abadi, E., & Baradaran, A. (2013). "The relationship between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies in Iranian EFL learners with different language proficiency level". *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, Vol.2(3), pp.176-185.

[5]. Borzabadi, D. F. (2000). "The relationship between language learning strategies and major field of study, sex, language proficiency, and learning styles". *Unpublished Ph.D diessertation,* Allameh Tabatabaee University.

[6]. Bozinovic, N., & Sindik, J. (2011). "Gender differences in the use of learning strategies in adult foreign language learners". *Metodicki Obzori*, Vol.11(6), pp.17-32.

[7]. Chamot, A. U. (2004). "Issues in language learning strategy research and teaching". *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching,* Vol.1(1), pp.14-26.

[8]. Cohen, A. D. (2003). "The learner's side of foreign language learning: Where do style, strategies, and tasks meet?" *International Review of Applied Linguistics,* Vol.41, pp.279–291.

[9]. Cotterall, S. (2000). "Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: Principles for designing language courses". *ELT journal,* Vol.54(2), pp.109-117.

[10]. Dolati, R., & Seliman, S. (2011). "An investigation of Iranian students' weaknesses in spoken English". *Journal of Edupres,* Vol.1, pp.94-99.

[11]. Ehrman, M. & Oxford, R. (1990). "Adult language learning styles and strategies in an intensive training setting". *Modern language Journal,* Vol.74(3), pp.311-327.

[12]. Fewel, N. (2010). "Language learning strategies and English language proficiency: An investigation of Japanese EFL university students". *Tesol Journal*, Vol.2, pp.159-174.

[13]. Gharbavi, A., & Mousavi, A., (2012). "Do language proficiency levels correspond to language learning strategy adoption? English Language Teaching", Vol.5(7), pp.110-122.

[14]. Ghavamnia, M., Kassaian, Z., & Dabaghi, A. (2011). "The relationship between language learning strategies, language learning beliefs, motivation, and proficiency: A study of EFL learners in Iran". *Journal of Language Teaching and Research,* Vol.2(5), pp.1156-1161.

[15]. Green, J. M., & Oxford, R. (1995). "A closer look at learning strategies, L2 proficiency, and gender". *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol.29(2), pp.261-297.

[16]. Griffiths, C. (2003). "Patterns of language learning strategy use". Vol.31, pp.367- 383.

[17]. Halbach, A. (2000). "Finding out about students' learning strategies, L2 proficiency, and gender". *TESOL Quarterly,* Vol.29(2), pp.261-293.

[18]. Hong-Nam, K. & Leavell, A. G. (2006). "Language learning strategy use of ESL students in an intensive English learning context". Vol.34, pp.399-415.

[19]. Hsiao, T. Y. & Oxford, R. L. (2002). "Comparing theories of language learning strategies: A confirmatory factor analysis". *The Modern Language Journal,* Vol.86(3), pp.368-383.

[20]. Ismail, S. A. A., & Al Khatib, A. Z. (2013). "Investigating the language learning strategies of students in the foundation program of United Arab Emirates University". *International Education Studies*, Vol.6(9), pp.135-149.

[21]. Kashefian-Naeeini, S., & Maarof, N. (2010). "A study of the use of language learning strategies among students in Iran". *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, Vol.6, pp.195-233.

[22]. Kaur, M., & Embi, M. A. (2011). "The relationship between language learning strategies and gender among primary school students". *Theory and Practice in*

Language Studies, Vol.1(10), pp.1432-1436.

[23]. Ketabi, S., & Mohammadi, A. M., (2012). "Can learning strategies predict language proficiency? A case in Iranian EFL context". *International Journal of Linguistics,* Vol.4(4). pp.407-418.

[24]. Khabiri, M., & Azaminejad, M. (2009). "The relationship between EFL learners' use of language learning strategies and self-perceived language proficiency". *The Journal of Applied Linguistics,* Vol.2(2), pp.130-159.

[25]. Khalil, A. (2005). "Assessment of language learning strategies used by Palestinian EFL learners". *Foreign Language Annals,* Vol.38(1), pp.108-119.

[26]. Khosravi, M., (2012). "A study of language learning strategies used by EFL learners in Iran: Exploring proficiency effect on English language learning strategies". *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol.2(10), pp.2122-2132.

[27]. Magogwe, J. M., & Oliver, R. (2007). "The relationship between language learning strategies, proficiency, age and self-efficacy beliefs: A study of language learners in Botswana". Vol.35, pp.338–352.

[28]. Martinez, I. M. P. (1996). "The Importance of Language Learning Strategies in Foreign Language Teaching". *Cuadernos de Filologlu Inglesa,* Vol.5(1), pp.103-120.

[29]. McMullen, M. G. (2009). "Using language learning strategies to improve the writing skills of Saudi EFL students: Will it really work?" Vol.37, pp.418–433.

[30]. Naiman, N., Frohlich, M., Stern, H. H., & Todesco, A. (1978). "The good language learner: Research in education". *Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Institute for Studies in Education.*

[31]. O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). "Learning strategies in second language acquisition". *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*

[32]. O'Malley, J. M., Chamot, A.U., Stewner-Manzanares, G., Russo, R., & Kupper, L. (1985). "Learning strategy applications with students of English as a second language". *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol19(3), pp.557-584.

[33]. Ouyang O. C., (2011). "Influence of English proficiency on postgraduate students' use of language learning strategies". *Sino-US English Teaching*, Vol.8(12), pp.766-772.

[34]. Oxford, R. L., (1989). "Use of language learning strategies: A synthesis of studies with implications for strategy training". Vol.17(2), pp.235-247.

[35]. Oxford, R. L. (1990). "Language learning strategies: what every teacher should know". New York: Newbury House.

[36]. Oxford, R. L., & Burry-Stock, J. A. (1995). "Assessing the use of language learning strategies worldwide with the ESL/EFL version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)". Vol.23(1), pp.1-23.

[37]. Oxford, R. L., and Nyikos, M. (1989). "Variables affecting choice of language learning strategies by university students". *Modern Language Journal*, Vol.73, pp.291-300.

[38]. Oxford, R. L. (2002). "Language learning strategies in a nutshell: Update and ESL suggestions". In J. C. Richards, & W. A. Renandya (Eds), Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice (pp. 124-132). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[39]. Paribakht, T. (1985). "Strategic competence and language proficiency". *Applied Linguistics*, Vol.6(2), pp.132-145.

[40]. Park, G. (1997). "Language learning strategies and English proficiency in Korean University students". *Foreign Language Annals*, Vol.30(2), pp.211–221.

[41]. Phakiti (2003). "A closer look at gender and strategy use in L2 reading". *Language Learning,* Vol.53(4), pp.649-702.

[42]. Politzer, R., & McGroarty, M. (1985). "An exploratory study of learning behaviors and their relationships to gains in linguistic and communicative competence". *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol.19(1), pp.104-124.

[43]. Rahimi, M., Riazi, A., & Saif, S. (2008). "An investigation into the factors affecting the use of language learning strategies by Persian EFL learners". *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics (CJAL)*, Vol.11(2), pp.31-60.

[44]. Rubin, J. (1975). "What the good language learner can teach us". *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol.9, pp.41-51.

[45]. Rubin, J. (1987). "Learner strategies: Theoretical assumptions, research history, and typology". In A Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies and language learning*

(pp. 15–30). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

[46]. Salahshour, F., Sharif, M., & Salahshour, N. (2013). "The relationship between language learning strategy use, language proficiency level and learner gender". *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences,* Vol.70, pp.634 – 643.

[47]. Salem N. M. (2006). "The role of motivation, gender, and language learning strategies in EFL proficiency". The American University of Beirut. Beirut, Lebanon.

[48]. Shukri Mat Teh, K., Embi, M. A., Nik Yusoff, N. M. R., & Mahamod, Z. (2009). "A Closer Look at Gender and Arabic Language Learning Strategies Use". *European Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.9(3), pp.399-407.

[49]. Stern, H. H. (1992). "Issues and options in language teaching". Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[50]. Su, M. H. M. (2005). "A study of EFL technological and vocational college students' language learning strategies and their self-perceived English proficiency". *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, Vol.2(1), pp.44-56.

[51]. Tajeddin, Z., & Alemi, M. (2010). "Less proficient vs more proficient L2 learners' preferences for compensation strategies: L1-based, L2-based, and nonliguistic". *LiBRI. Linguistic and Literary Broad Research and Innovation,* Vol.1(2), pp.48-55.

[52]. Vann, R. L., & Abraham, R. G. (1990). "Strategies of unsuccessful language learners". *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol.24(2), pp.177-198.

[53]. Weng P. S. (2012). "The effect of learning styles on learning strategy use by EFL learners". *Journal of Social Sciences,* Vol.8(2), pp.230-234.

[54]. Wharton, G. (2000). "Language learning strategy use of bilingual foreign language learners in Singapore". *Language Learning*, pp.50(2), pp.203–243.

[55]. Wu Y. L. (2008). "Language learning strategies used by students at different proficiency levels". *Asian EFL Journal*, Vol.10(4), pp.75-95.

[56]. Zarafshan, M., & Ardeshiri, M. (2012). "The relationship between emotional intelligence, language learning strategies and English proficiency among Iranian EFL university students". *Journal of Educational and Instructional Studies in the World*, Vol.2(3), pp.105-114.

[57]. Zarei, A. A., & Elekaei, A. (2013). "The effect of motivation on the choice of language learning strategies". *International SAMANM Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, Vol.1(1), pp.51-63.

[58]. Zarei, A. A. & Shahidi Pour V. (2013). "Language learning strategies as predictors of L2 idioms comprehension". *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World (IJLLALW)*, Vol.4(2), pp.313-330.

[59]. Ziahosseini, M., & Salehi, M. (2007). "An investigation of the relationship between motivation and language learning strategies". *Pazhuhesh-e Zabanha-ye Khareji*, Vol.41, Special Issue, pp.85-107.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Abbas Ali Zarei is an associate professor in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), is currently a member of academic staff at Imam Khomeini International University (IKIU) in Qazvin, Iran. He has 21 years of teaching experience. He has had 38 books and 61 papers published. He has also attended and presented at 19 conferences across the world.

Nooshin Baharestani is an MA holder in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and an experienced teacher who currently teaches at various language institutes.