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Reading Strategy Use in Iranian Young Learners' Classrooms Through a Task-Based Syllabus

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Abstract. With regard to the impossibility of preparing learners for each situation that they might encounter in their life, it is more logical to teach them how to cope with unexpected challenges. Helping learners 'learn how to help themselves' can be facilitated by means of tasks and activities in the classroom context. This paper presents some of the findings of a study on Iranian young learners between the ages of 13 and 17, learning English as a foreign language. The main aim of the study was to examine the effect of task-based strategy instruction on junior and senior high school learners' reading comprehension performance, and in the process, several factors influencing the classroom acquisition of English became evident. From among these, the emergence of strategies will be discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, task-based instruction, age, gender.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an unprecedented increase not only in the number of young learners (YLs) and their teachers, but also in the quantity of language policy documents, teachers' handbooks, teaching materials, and empirical studies devoted to the topic of early foreign language learning (ELL).

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However, teaching language to YLs faces some difficulties. The real difficulty results from the difference between children's needs and activities at the time of learning the language and their future adult task needs. The type of classroom activities should be such to provide children with an opportunity to use language for both their presently intrinsically motivating purposes, and, through the development of positive attitudes towards foreign language learning, to further develop their proficiency after leaving school. Teachers can adopt activities in which language is graded and sequenced naturally along with developmental stages, and the background knowledge of the world, visual aids, actions, body language and appropriate teacher talk ensures that roughly tuned input (Krashen, 1985) becomes intake.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Young learners' use of strategies

Research on strategies has focused on two broad areas: learning strategies and communication strategies. In learning strategies, the learner makes attempts to establish competence in the target language, whereas in a communication strategy the difficulty of the moment is to be solved.

Looking at learning strategies from the linguistic perspective, a contradiction can be identified. The universal hypothesis claims that second language acquisition happens naturally, without mental efforts on the learner's part. Consequently, learning strategies reflect what happens in cases of instructed SLA, or, in Krashen's (1985) terminology, while "learning (not acquiring subconsciously) the target language" (p. 54). On the other hand, research on communication strategies does not take acquisition into consideration, but aims to find out how learners manage to solve their problems in certain situations. The focus of this paper will be learning strategies.

2.2 Learning strategies

The term 'learning strategies' is used in a variety of ways by different researchers and its precise meaning is sometimes difficult to ascertain (Smith, 1994; Stern, 1983). Consistent with these comments, Ellis (1994) states that different researchers define learning strategies differently according to their personal perception and belief and that definitions of learning strategies have tended to be ad hoc and theoretical. In addition, one of the best approaches to defining learning strategies is to list the main characteristics of the learning strategies defined and used in the studies by different researchers. Stevick (1990), however, suggests that no matter how different the definitions, they tend to share two common characteristics: the first to do with general characteristics of learners and the second to do with techniques.

Learning strategies-or as they are more recently labelled "learner strategies" (McDonough, 1999, p. 2)-are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. In Oxford's (1990) definition, "learning strategies are operations employed by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8).

In Cook's (1993) view, the concept of learning strategies "goes against the belief that the language knowledge differs from other forms of knowledge" (Cook, 1993, p. 136). He argues that there is an inherent contradiction between learning strategy research and linguistics, because whatever the strategies might be, they should be language learning strategies, not general learning strategies, as language knowledge differs from other types of knowledge.

The younger the learners, the less learning strategies they use, as they tend to rely on naturalistic processes of acquisition. As schooling progresses, children develop their learning skills and the use of learning strategies increases. Some of the strategies are borrowed from other subject areas, and they cannot be regarded as specific language learning strategies. Other strategies are closely related to FLL, and can be identified as language learning strategies.

In classifying language learning strategies by different researchers, various strategy names are used, rather than a standard and consistent set of terminology. According to Oxford and Crookall (1989), it is impossible to provide a complete glossary of technical terms used in all studies. This makes it difficult in many cases to compare strategies reported in one study with those reported in another (Chamot, 1987; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). What follows is a consideration of the language learning strategy classification systems which have been identified as the result of research on language learning strategies in different contexts by different researchers. These have made an important contribution to the knowledge of language learning strategies.

Two taxonomies are examined from the point of view of what learning strategies they identify, and which of these are relevant for children in FLL contexts. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) differentiated between three types of learning strategies:

- metacognitive strategies;
- cognitive strategies; and
- social mediation strategies.

Metacognitive strategies are about learning rather than learning strategies themselves. Cognitive strategies "operate directly on incoming information, ma-

nipulating it in ways that enhance learning"; whereas social mediation strategies, or social/affective strategies, represent a broad group that involves either interaction with another person or control over affect (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, pp. 44-45).

The other system of learning strategies was developed by Oxford (1990), in which she identified two broad types: direct strategies, and indirect strategies. The direct class is composed of memory strategies for remembering and retrieving new information, cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, and compensation strategies for using the language despite knowledge gaps. Indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies for coordinating the learning process, affective strategies for regulating emotions, and social strategies for learning with others. These two types are further divided into six general kinds of learning strategies, resulting in 19 sets of learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). As this system is more comprehensible than the one suggested by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), further explorations will be based on this source.

Oxford (1990) divides indirect strategies into three groups:

• *metacognitive,* or planning/evaluating strategies, such as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one's progress and monitoring errors;

• *affective,* or emotional/motivational strategies, such as anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward; and

• *social* strategies, such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the target language, and becoming culturally aware. On the other hand, direct strategies are divided into the following three groups:

• *memory* strategies, such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, and structured reviewing;

• *cognitive* strategies, such as reasoning, analysing, summarizing, and general practicing;

• *compensation* strategies, such as guessing meanings from the context in reading and listening, and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning when the precise expression is not known.

Some of these strategies may emerge in the classroom naturally, but most need to be developed through tasks and activities. First, planning/evaluation strategies will be considered. The most important finding of the research on motivation in child FLL (Nikolov, 1999) suggests that children will not pay at-

tention unless classroom activities are intrinsically motivating for them. Young children do not search for practice opportunities consciously, although they play games, retell rhymes or stories with pleasure. They are unable to centre their own learning, but if they are involved in decision making in a task-based syllabus, they will gradually develop this strategy. Similarly, children can be involved in self-evaluation successfully. As for monitoring errors, learners can become conscious of their errors gradually, but error treatment techniques should encourage self-correction. If performance is perceived as process rather than product, children can develop their use of monitor 'by feel' successfully.

According to Oxford (1990), emotional/motivational strategies consist of anxiety reduction, self-encouragement and self-reward. With young learners, these strategies first come from the teacher and children can develop responsibility for them. Initially, the teacher is responsible for a relaxed atmosphere in the class, encouragement and evaluative feedback for children, but if children are involved in these processes, they will become conscious of them and employ these strategies successfully. Knowledge in itself as an aim of language learning represents the type of self-reward this strategy involves. One particular aspect of emotional learning strategies is related to the use of laughter (Oxford, 1990). Learning can be fun with the help of playful activities and humour, as they lower anxiety. Children also try to be witty in the target language and use humour for involving and impressing peers. In this sense, emotional/motivational strategies overlap with social ones.

Social strategies involve asking questions, cooperating and empathizing with others, and becoming culturally aware. Young learners often ask for clarification and verification, but the focus of this strategy tends to be meaning rather than form. Cooperation with peers is most frequently encouraged with the help of pair work and group work.

The role of the teacher is very special in FLL contexts, as cooperating with the teacher substitutes the aspect of cooperating with native speakers in Oxford's model (1990, p. 21) and in the SLA theory proposed by Wong Fillmore (1991). Young learners accept the teacher as a model, but this relationship changes over time.

Memory strategies are so important in child FLL that some educators place them in the centre of their programme. Recent findings in neurolinguistics support the holistic approach, in which both hemispheres are involved in language learning. The most important memory strategies in child FLL are related to applying images and employing action. These strategies can be developed with the help of drama techniques, music, visual aids and images and total physical response activities.

Although all of the strategies in Oxford's classification are of central importance in young learners' learning, this study has focused on only the cognitive

and metacognitive strategies.

2.3. Task-based strategy use

According to Ellis (2003), "a task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed" (p. 16). Task-based language teaching employs communicative and interactive activities as the basic units of the organization and conduction of pedagogy. Task-based language teaching is based on the use of tasks and activities as opposed to the use of grammatical and vocabulary points in abstract. As Ellis (2003) puts, tasks are planned activities which are goal-directed and their primary focus is on meaning since there is an authentic and real process of using language. This process helps to involve learners' cognitive processes including strategies and therefore bring about appropriate communicative results.

Many language learners are likely to change their strategy use based on the specific contextual and situational requirements of the instruction, context, and culture (Mollaee & Fazilatfar, 2005). One study in this area is conducted by Ikeda and Takeuchi (2000) who attempted to investigate the impact of the presence or absence of a task on the learners' strategy use. The results showed that participants who received tasks reported higher strategy preferences than those who did not. Moreover, task difficulty was another factor which greatly influenced the types and frequencies of the reported strategy use.

Although there are several research studies done in the area of task-based instruction effects on different language skills (Khomeijani & Khaghani Nejad, 2009; Haghighi, 2004), there is dearth of research on task-based strategy use specially with young language learners. The present study, therefore, is an attempt to investigate the young learners' strategy use in task-based situation.

2.4. Strategy use across gender

General traditional gender differences show that women use a greater number of strategies than men in achievement areas (e.g., Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Oxford & Green, 1995; Mochizuki, 1999; Peacock & Ho, 2003). The assumption that women use more strategies and therefore manifest more successful self-regulation in language learning makes a lot of sense. Nonetheless, another group of studies suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Ctalan (2003) argues that gender differences may exist between male and female learners due to innate and social causes and they are more alike than different. It seems that the greater use of strategies attributed to women may not be always consistent and do not always affect behavior.

Research has also indicated that the two groups employ different strategies. For example, it is assumed that women use more social language learning strategies not only in classroom context but also in real world interac-

tion contexts (Politzer, 1983; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). They also use more study strategies and rule-related strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989); more monitoring strategies in comprehension (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Bacon, 1992); rehearsing and planning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Bacon & Finnemann, 1992); and input elicitation strategies (Gass & Varonis, 1986; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Men learners, on the other hand, have been reported to use more translation strategies (Bacon, 1992); output production strategies in contrast to women who use it to obtain more input (Gass & Varonis, 1986); and employ more tactile and visual learning strategies than women learners (Reid, 1987).

Research conducted so far on the role of gender is not conclusive enough to determine absolutely different ways of learning for two groups of female and male learners. There are many other educational factors affecting the success of the two sexes. Certainly, further studies are needed to examine the pattern of strategy use by male and female learners in uniform educational contexts.

The present study aims to establish a connection between cognitive and metacognitive strategy training and the posttest reading comprehension performance of the experimental group participants. It was believed that these students can be taught to read in a more strategic way during reading tasks and that the control group participants would fail to have the same result.

3. Research Questions

The study set out to seek answers to the following research questions:
1. Is there any difference between junior and senior high school learners' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies?
2. Does task-based strategy instruction in EFL reading affect cognitive and metacognitive strategies employed by young Iranian EFL students and their reading comprehension performance in English?
3. Do female and male young learners show different patterns of cognitive and metacognitive strategy use?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Participants

Four groups of learners were involved in the study. The students came from four intact classes that were randomly designated as two control groups (n = 52) and two experimental groups (n = 60). 57 young male learners aged 13 from a junior high school and 55 female learners aged 17 from a senior high school participated in the study. For the purpose of consistency, the two schools were government schools situated in Karaj. The junior high school participants took the KET (Key English Test, 2006) and the senior high school learners took the PET (Preliminary English Test, 2006) proficiency tests. The

results of proficiency tests showed that they were at the same level of proficiency (beginners for junior students and intermediate for senior students).

4.2 Instrumentation

Three instruments were used in this study to elicit data on learners' cognitive and metacognitive strategies and their reading comprehension performance.

4.2.1 The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

The instrument that was used for eliciting data on learners' strategies is version seven of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). This version of SILL (1990) is a questionnaire developed to assess the frequency of strategy use by non-native speakers (ESL/EFL, 50 items) which consists of these sub-scales (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995): memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective, social strategies. In the present study, only the cognitive and metacognitive sections were administered to the learners. These sections were translated to the native language of the learners, i.e. Persian, to prevent the difficulties arising from understanding the language of the questionnaire.

4.2.2 Reading tests

The junior high school participants were given the reading section of KET (2006) test and the senior high school participants were given the PET (2006) reading texts. The form of the questions included two reading comprehension passages, three matching questions, and one fill-in-the-blank type question.

4.3 Procedures

All classes were conducted in a 75-minute time slot. The teacher took 15 minutes to explain the activities to the students. The class material (50 min) was presented with activities similar to each experimental class. After teaching the new section of the book, the teacher encouraged either small problem-solving groups or learning activities with a 'jigsaw' approach which were structured around previously established permanent learning teams of 3-4 students. Discussion among the participants was encouraged and, while questions to the teacher were encouraged, they were answered by either repeating the material presented or deflecting the question to a future time. Along with these activities, the teacher asked students about the strategies they applied while reading the textbook passages. She modeled the appropriate reading strategies and encouraged them to use the strategies in their reading comprehension process.

The control group participants were also presented the same materials but they were not encouraged to engage in problem-solving activities and they followed a more traditional classroom setting. In other words, the teacher presented the material and the examples were completed by the teacher and students followed along passively. Questions were answered by repeating the notes.

The data on the performance of the learners in the reading comprehension test along with their strategy preferences were collected in one session in which participants were given instruction on how to answer the questions. Immediately after the completion of the reading comprehension test, they were asked to report their employed strategies about which they had awareness in the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). In fact, the participants flled out the items of the questionnaire which elicited information about the types of activities used in the classroom. They were asked to chose the answers that were most related to them which would range from never or almost never true of me to usually not true of me, somewhat true of me, usually true of me, and always or almost always true of me.

5. Results

The process of data analysis began with computing the descriptive statistics of participants of two age groups. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for cognitive and metacognitive strategy use by the age groups

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Senior	49	2.3265	.71844	.10263
Junior	63	1.7302	.76636	.09655

An independent samples t-test was employed to examine whether or not differences existed between the students' strategy use and their age.

Table 2. Independent samples t-test results for cognitive and metacognitive strategy use across age

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.369	.545	4.198	110	.000	.59637	.14206	.31484	.87791
Equal variances not assumed			4.232	106.174	.000	.59637	.14091	.31701	.87574

As it is shown in Table 2, the probability value is less than 0.05(p = 0.000 < 0.05) which means that there is a signifcant difference between two age groups.

Thus, it was concluded that senior learners employed more cognitive and metacognitive strategies than their junior high school peers.

In order to determine whether there was a signifcant difference between the means obtained by the experimental and control groups on the reading tests, the independent samples t-test was used. The descriptive statistics and the results of the independent t-test are reported in Tables 3 and 4 respectively.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for cognitive and metacognitive strategy use by the experimental and control groups

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	60	2.2833	.76117	.09827
Control	52	1.6538	.71083	.09857

According to Table 3, the mean score of cognitive and metacognitive strategies within the experimental group (2.28) and within the control group (1.65) was obtained.

Table 4. Independent samples t-test results for cognitive and metacognitive strategy use across type of instruction

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.394	.531	4.500	110	.000	.62949	.13987	.35229	.90669
Equal variances not assumed			4.523	109.367	.000	.62949	.13919	.35363	.90534

Table 4 indicated there was a statistically signifcant ($t(110) = 4.500, P <$ .05) difference between experimental and control groups. So, cognitive and metacognitive strategies within task-based group (2.28) were more than within control group (1.65).

The components of SILL in which the experimental group was signifcantly better than the control group (both male and female) include: (cognitive strategies) reasoning, $t(110) = 12.66, P < 0.05$; analyzing, $t(110) = 18.06, P < 0.05$; summarizing, $t(110) = 12.66, P < 0.05$; (metacognitive strategies): consciously searching for practice opportunities, $t(110) = 17.25, P < 0.05$; planning for language tasks, $t(110) = 17.56, P < 0.05$; self-evaluation, $t(110) = 14.25, P < 0.05$; and monitoring errors, $t(110) = 16.25, P < 0.05$. In contrast, the components that the control group was signifcantly better than the experimental group (both male and female) include (cognitive strategies) general practicing, $t(1, 99) = 10.43, P < .05$; (metacognitive strategies): paying attention.

The independent t-test was also conducted to determine whether the participants exhibited any signifcant difference with regard to their gender. The descriptive statistics and the results of the independent t-test can be seen in Tables 5 and 6, respectively.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for cognitive and metacognitive strategy use by male and female learners

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Female	55	2.2182	.76233	.10279
Male	57	1.7719	.77960	.10326

Table 6. Independent samples t-test results for cognitive and metacognitive strategy use across gender

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.106	.764	3.062	110	.553	.44625	.14576	.15739	.73511
Equal variances not assumed			3.062	109.980	.553	.44625	.14570	.15751	.73500

As can be seen in Table 6, there was no significant difference in the mean scores obtained by the participants of the two groups on the reading comprehension test. It could be claimed that the participants of the two groups were equal with regard to their overall reading comprehension ability, as well as their applied cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

6. Discussion

The data of this study clearly show that the participants had a substantial awareness and control of their cognitive activities while reading. The information provided by the participants demonstrated that L2 academic reading was a complex process in which they consciously and actively invoked a repertoire of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Regarding the first question, there was a significant difference between the learners of different ages and their use of strategies. With respect to the type of classroom activities used, the findings of the present research show differences regarding the kind of instruction. The findings showed that Iranian students in task-based classrooms employed more strategies in their reading of the passages than their peers in traditional classes. This finding is in line with some of the previous studies (e.g., Nikolov, 1999; Worthy, Gorlick, Pacheco, Schnyer, & Maddox, 2011; Worthy & Maddox, 2012). Worthy et al. (2011) and Worthy and Maddox (2012) found better results for adults' learning in choice-dependent tasks. In contrast with these studies, the findings of the present study are in conflict with those of Fazilatfar (2010) who found that neither task difficulty nor the proficiency level and their interaction influenced the learners' reported strategy use. The results of the present study also showed that the use of strategies across the participants' gender was not significantly different.

The success of tasks in teaching strategies is of invaluable significance to the determination of the learners' cognitive processes. Compared with the traditional teacher-fronted teaching methods, tasks can better improve the learning processes. In addition, psychologically speaking, tasks bring about effective results by raising learners' motivation and interest. In other words, the motivation of accomplishing a task and reaching to the desired outcome has a significant role in engaging learners in classroom activities and also in the influence of the task. Maintaining interest through the employment of various task types can mean maintaining of effort (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2005) and in turn better language gains.

Tasks provide a stress free and joyful environment for meaningful reading and comprehension of the ideas. Tasks also help the teacher to create a context in which reading is useful and meaningful. The variety and intensity that tasks offer may lower anxiety (Richard-Amato, 1988) and encourage shyer learners to take part in classroom activities (Uberman, 1998). The emotions aroused

when conducting tasks add variety to the sometimes less encouraging, serious process of language instruction (Bransford, Brown, & Coking, 2000).

These benefits associated with the use of tasks are more advantageous for young learners. The less proficient the learners, the more strategies they need to exploit in order to compensate for the lack of competence. YLs can develop their use of strategies if they are regularly required to use them in classroom activities. Task-based syllabuses require the employment of achievement strategies, and can serve as the source of strategy training activities. Limited proficiency learners use more non-linguistic strategies and this tendency can be encouraged by the use of mimes and role-play. Different types of guessing games develop interlanguage strategies, such as the use of synonyms and antonyms, substitution and paraphrase. Prediction tasks (in which children are required to guess what would happen next) also require learners to use language creatively by utilizing an array of strategies. In this pedagogical perspective, strategies can also contribute to the learner's attempts to bring about long-term competence.

7. Conclusion

Today, more and more learners start learning FLs at an earlier age in different educational contexts and under so many varying conditions; therefore, many of the issues identified in previous studies are still on the agenda, but new ones have also surfaced. One of the obvious consequences is that early starters may achieve levels their peers used to achieve later; therefore, there must be new strategies for building on what they can do and for maintaining their motivation over an extended period of time. The most widely applied ELL models may turn out to be less motivating and cognitively challenging after a few years. The integration of content and language at an early stage may help learners progress, but teacher education must keep in line with emerging needs.

Realistic aims and achievement targets must be continuously reexamined in specific educational contexts to meet local needs and reflect local realities. Obviously, the academic discussions and research have moved beyond unrealistic expectations of native speaker levels, both in the case of YLs and their teachers. Most studies explore realities of daily work with YLs. Teacher education in general, and teachers' age-appropriate methodology and proficiency in the target language in particular, however, are high on the global agenda. Preparing teachers who are motivated and able to work efficiently with YLs in good quality programs is the way to move forward.

More studies are needed on how teachers implement curricula in their classrooms, how they assess and scaffold their learners' development over an extended period, how they help YLs develop appropriate strategies, how YLs benefit from early exposure to their new language in other domains, and as adolescents and adults. Perhaps an integration of local and trans-contextual

research that approaches ELL from different perspectives is the most promising in the globalized world in which YLs live.

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