

Do Language Proficiency Levels Correspond to Language Learning Strategy Adoption?

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Abstract

The primary focus of research on employment of language learning strategies has been on identification of adoption of different learning strategies. However, the relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency levels was ignored in previous research. The present study was undertaken to find out whether there are any relationship between the employment of different strategies and learners' levels of language proficiency. To this end, initially, a simulated TOEFL test (Bailey, R. F., Seetharaman, S., Gavin, C. A., Shukla, N., Penfield, J., and Subramanian, R., 1993) was administered to classify the learners into three classes of proficiency levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. Then, Oxford's Strategy Inventory, SILL, (Oxford, 1990b) was used to determine the frequency of the language learning strategies applied by learners. The results indicated that there is a direct relationship between employment of different strategies and proficiency levels. Therefore, the findings, in general, seem convincing enough to enable one to claim that there is a correspondence between the employment of different strategies and proficiency levels. The results of the present study are by no means complete. More research is needed to substantiate the outcome of the current study. One pedagogical implication of the study is that language instructors and syllabus designers should be advised to inform language learners about language learning strategies. Other implications have been discussed.

Keywords: language learning strategies, proficiency levels, strategy adoption

1. Introduction

Investigation of the role of second language learning strategies in learning a language continues to be revealing for the better understanding of the nature of language learning. The study of language strategy and their interaction with the diverse factors (such as age, nationality, levels of proficiency) calls for different research projects to shed light on this vast and complicated area of language learning. There has been a worldwide agreement on the necessity of language learning strategy (Rubin, 1975; Seliger 1984; Burt, Dulay & Finocchiaro 1997; Su2005).

A considerable number of research have been conducted on language strategies (Ellis, 1987; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Nunan, 1999; Brown, 2000; Sue, 2005). In so In some of the most comprehensive research of language learning strategies, O'Malley, Stewner-Manzares, Kupper, and Russo (1985) and O'Malley, Chamot and Ellis (1985) studied the application of strategies by EFL learners in the United States.

Language learning strategies have been of importance to a number of methodologists to find out what set of strategies English language learners (ELLs) apply to promote their language potential and enhance the capability of their linguistic competence (McIntyre, 1994; Jain" 1969; Levin and Hause, 1987; Brown, 2000). The recognition of what strategies work for the language learners enables them to eliminate the problems they encounter in the course of language learning. Moreover, researchers have tried to establish a relationship between language learning strategies and successful language learning and their linkage to language proficiency.

Several applied linguists and methodologists have been attracted towards language proficiency studies and have worked on it (Higgs and Clifford, 1982; Omaggio, 1986 and Chastain, 1988). Vossoughi and Javaherian (2000) attribute the initial impetus of language proficiency to President Carter's Commission of Foreign Language and the report published by international studies entitled strength through wisdom. One of the recommendations of that commission was developing a standard way of rating language proficiency. The result of that recommendation was the publication in 1982 by the American Council on Teaching Foreign Language (ACTFL) of the Proficiency

Guidelines. Since the advent of these guidelines, the emphasis on proficiency has continually increased. Hughes (1996) referred to proficiency as having sufficient ability in language for a particular purpose. Cummins (1984) argued that many misconceptions about students' abilities, capabilities, and even fundamental intelligence are related to the way in which language proficiency has been defined. Specifically, students' conversational fluency in English is often mistaken as a reflection of their out-and-out proficiency in language. Language proficiency is defined as an individual's skill in language use for a specific purpose, and it can be evaluated through the application of a proficiency test (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992).

The previous studies on language learning strategies tried to find out what type of strategies are used by learners, or how many times each strategy is employed. However, there are other factors that must be attended to. The relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency levels was ignored. The present study attempts to find out whether there are any relationships between the employment of different strategies and learners' levels of language proficiency. Furthermore, the current study attempts to determine what effective and successful strategies are employed by learners across different levels of proficiency.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Conceptual Identification and Classification of Strategies

A number of definitions about language learning strategies have been presented by the researchers in language learning and methodology. As Cohen (1998) stated, the term strategy, in the second language learning (SLL), has appeared in order to be applied to the conscious moves adopted by second language users determined to be useful in both learning and employing a second language. Likewise, Clause and Casper (1983) stressed that learning strategies are attempts to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language to establish them into one's inter-language competence. Chamot (1987) stated that language learning strategies are techniques, approaches, or attentive actions that pupils adopt to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and contextual information.

Weinstein and Mayer (1986) defined learning strategies broadly as "behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning which are intended to influence the learners encoding process (p. 315). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) in their seminal study, Oxford (1990 a, p. 209) and Wenden and Rubin (1987) defined language learning strategies as the particular thoughts or behaviors and tasks that learners apply to assist them to comprehend, learn, and retain new data. Strategies help learners in acquisition, storage, retrieval, and the retention of information to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more efficient and more transferable to novel situations. Oxford (1990b), further added that, learning strategies are devices for the self-directed involvement which are essential for developing communicative ability. Seliger (1984) argued second language (L2) strategies are fragments of the interlanguage which may come out of a specific approach to the material in order to be learnt.

For Rubin (1987) and Cook (1991) strategies are a choice selected by the learner while learning or using a second language to develop the language system that he constructs and affects learning directly. Ellis (1987) and Cohen (1990) argued that learning strategies are the means whereby the learner processes the second language input to develop linguistic competence. Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) stated that learning strategies are means by which learners attempt to solve their problems of meanings and uses of words, grammatical rules, and other aspects of a language, for example by the use of generalization and inferencing. In second language learning, it is deliberate behaviours and thoughts that learners utilize while learning to help them understand better, and learn or recall new information. They may include focusing on certain aspects of new information, analysing, and organising information during learning to augment comprehension, and evaluate learning when it is completed in order to check whether extra action is needed. Strategies are special ways of catching on a problem or task, styles of operation for reaching a particular aim, designed plans for controlling and obtaining certain information. They are 'battle plans' contextualized which might alter from moment to moment, day to day, or year to year (Brown, 2000, p. 113).

Rubin (1975) suggested that successful learners use a strategies collection dependent on their own personality, learning style, and their individual needs. As Oxford argues, good language learners, use a combination of strategies which really work for them (1990b). Ellis (1994) took an optimistic attitude that "considerable progress has been made in classifying learning strategies from the early beginnings when researchers did little more than list strategies" (p. 539). He also noted that there are now comprehensible, multi-leveled, and theoretically-motivated categories such as the classifications suggested by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990b).

O'Malley, Chamot and Ellis (1985) used a classification of language learning strategies. Here strategies are divided into two broad categories of metacognitive and cognitive ones each of which include certain activities. Ellis (1985), studying the work of Faerch and Kasper (1980), categorized the process of learning and using L2 data into learning,

production, and communication strategies.

Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) have proposed the following classification of the language learning strategies applied by EFL/ESL learners:

1. Memory strategies: grouping, imagery, rhyming, and structured revealing
2. Cognitive strategies: reasoning, analyzing, summarizing, as well as general practicing.
3. Compensation strategies: guessing synonyms from the context in reading and listening, using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning when the precise expression is not known.
4. Metacognitive strategies: paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluation of one's progress, and monitoring errors.
5. Affective (emotional, motivation-related) strategies: anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward.
6. Social strategies: asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, and becoming culturally aware.

Oxford (1990b) mentions that strategies are essential for two reasons. First, they are means for active, self-guided involvement. Second; learners who have developed proper learning strategies give greater self-confidence and learn more efficiently. Carter and Nunan (2001) note learning strategies can be applied to help learners to store data, to assist them to construct language rules, and to help them obtain proper attitudes towards the learning situation. Nunan (1999) has proposed the relationship between learning strategies and language acquisition by:

1. defining learning strategies
2. strategy preferences and biographical variables
3. learner types
4. strategy training and task performance

Harlow (1988) argued that most learning strategy research is dependent on learners' desires and capability to describe their internal behaviours, both cognitive and affective. Students with an analytic learning style prefer strategies such as contrastive analysis, rule learning, and dissecting words and phrases, whereas students with a global style use strategies that help them find the big picture, i.e. guessing, scanning, predicting, and assist them in conversing without knowing all the words, i.e. paraphrasing and gesturing. Visually oriented students use strategies such as listing, word grouping, and so on, whereas those with an auditory preference like to work with tapes and practice aloud. Students whose style includes tolerance for ambiguity use significantly different learning strategies in some instances from those used by students who are intolerant of ambiguity (Oxford, 1990b, p. 127).

Seliger (1984) tried to distinguish between conscious and unconscious learning strategies. Then, he proposed conscious strategies by learners called 'tactics' which seek out the opportunities of learning, and conscious practicing of L2 patterns. Cohen (1990) claim that just conscious strategies are language learning strategies, and they must be a choice of learners. Hismanoglu (2000) claim all language learners while processing information and performing tasks in the language classrooms apply learning strategies either consciously or unconsciously because language learning classrooms are like a place of solving a problem where learners may encounter new input or difficult tasks posed by their teacher.

Cohen, Weaver and Li (1996) argue that language learners can apply language learning and language use strategies across language skills while doing language tasks inside and outside the, classroom. These strategies may appear in the task performance at three stages.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) argued that learner strategy research itself develops from the learning strategies since learner instructing is linked to the theory and practice of student autonomy and self-directed learning. Su (2005) contends that language learning strategies are surely the means and the fast ways to assist the technological and vocational students to learn English for both the present and lifelong of foreign languages. Brown (2000) argues that in the latest years, there is evidence of the utility of learners compounded strategies in their acquisition process. In brief, based on the previously mentioned statements, it is assumed that there might be a relationship between language learning strategies and the proficiency levels that learners possess to acquire a language aptly .

2.2 Language Proficiency and Strategy Use

The goal of second language teaching is to help language learners attain proficiency in a second language, and this has been stated in terms of objectives or standards as is argued by Stern (1991). Stern considers the conceptualization and description of proficiency an important phase in second language learning. Nunan defined

proficiency as the common language ability. Brumfit (1984) used fluency in lieu of proficiency and presented its definition as, "the maximally effective operation of the language system so far acquired by the student" (p. 543). Carter and Nunan (2001) defined proficiency as the ability to apply the second language for communicative purposes. For Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) proficiency refers to the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language. Proficiency may be measured through the use of a proficiency test.

Stem (1997) stated that a group of concepts define proficiency as linguistic content. For Stem (1997) proficiency in two languages can probably be offered as what Cummins (1980) has called the 'dual-iceberg' phenomenon that represents underlying current and language-specific constituents (p. 177). However, until 1970 or so, phonology, vocabulary, and grammar bore the definition of proficiency. Richards (1978) wrote today the definition of proficiency bears semantic, discourse, and sociolinguistic elements. Hence, one definition of language proficiency besides grammatically well-formed rules bears speech act rules, language functions; and context.

Since the sixties it has obviously been observed that a simple classification of proficiency as the 'four skills', i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing, specially for curriculum design and testing has been offered (Stem, 1991). Yet, today several classes of proficiency levels have been presented by various researchers (Brown, 2001; Vossoughi & Javaherian, 2000) other than specified on the four skills.

Stem (1991) assumed that language proficiency range is from zero to full bilingual proficiency. Stem (1991) offers five language proficiency levels: (1) elementary proficiency; (2) limited working proficiency (3); minimum professional proficiency; (4) full professional proficiency; and (5) native or bilingual proficiency. He also stated that language proficiency of different groups of second language learners ranges from zero to native-like proficiency.

Vossoughi and Javaherian (2000) presented the guidelines established by ACTFL (American Council on Teaching Foreign Language) about the levels of proficiency. The proficiency guidelines have described four proficiency levels of language learners as novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior.

Brown (2001) states that nowadays nobody defines learners' proficiency level with the terms beginning, intermediate, or advanced. In brief, what is called beginning for some may not be the same for the others.

2.3 Proficiency-related Studies

A great deal of studies have been done on proficiency over the past two decades to present teachers, testers and researchers a clear picture of proficiency specifications and theories. Stem stated that one of the problems of language teaching is how to establish a way to assist the language learner to achieve an apt level of proficiency which is serviceable based on the learner's estimation and to make him get away from being arrested under an unserviceable low level (1997). Thomas (1992) claimed that during the past ten years, researchers have tried to find the length of time the students need school to acquire proficiency in second language in order to equally compete with the native speakers of the same language they are practicing.

Cummins (1979 & 1980) discusses proficiency at two levels: CALP -a cognitive/academic language proficiency- and BICS -basic interpersonal and communicative skills. He stated that proficiency at the school setting is a conscious or explicit mastery of language elements and language tests are prepared to evaluate proficiency in these terms. Yet, in other areas, proficiency is represented as the way through which language is employed by the first language speakers or by second language speakers.

Omaggio (1986, pp. 44-53) has suggested the following hypotheses about proficiency-oriented classrooms:

Hypothesis 1: Opportunities must be provided for students to practice using language in a range of contexts to be encountered in the target culture.

Hypothesis 2: Opportunities must be provided for students to practice carrying out a range of functions (task universals) likely to be necessary for dealing with others in the target language.

Hypothesis 3: There should be concern for the development of linguistic accuracy from the beginning of instruction.

Hypothesis 4: Proficiency-oriented approaches should respond to the affective needs of students as well as to their cognitive needs.

Hypothesis 5: Cultural understanding must be promoted in various ways so that students are prepared to live more harmoniously in the target language community.

Learners can be grouped in homogeneous-level classes of language proficiency, and teachers can design language content related to the students' proficiency level. From Brown's viewpoint (2001), teaching beginning learners is the most difficult level of language teaching because learners at this level have no or little knowledge of L2. Hall and

Hewings (2001) state that if a teacher does not speak the learners L1 or does not benefit from bilingual assistants or other first language materials and is going to get information from and about learners, extra limitations and constraints, he must initiate it with the low-proficient learners.

Oller has put forward that proficiency is unitary, and he presented the figure of proficiency 'as grammar-based expectancies' or 'expectancy grammar' (1976, pp. 165-167). Yet, Farhady stated that "language proficiency is one of the most poorly defined concepts in the field of language testing" (1982, p. 44).

Chastain (1988) informed that there are two main differences between proficiency and other approaches. At first, the term proficiency meant the scale for measuring language proficiency. The effort has been made to permeate the materials and classroom rehearsal as the instructors are looking for in order to develop means whereby their learners can achieve a specific level of the proficiency rating scale. Another difference is that linguistic accuracy and proficiency is emphasized from the beginning stages of L2 instruction as a way to develop second language skills.

Thomas (1992) argued that the goal of proficiency for nonnative speakers is equal to a native speaker in a moving target. Besides, the socio-cultural context where learners are studying is also important for their long-period success in the target language. Opposite the well-known idea that it takes a motivated student a short period to learn a second language, the studies on immigrants and language minority learners with many different background characteristics have found that 4-12 years of second language development are necessary for the most progressed learners to catch up deep academic proficiency and have a competition successfully with L1 speakers (Collier, 1995).

Collier (1992) and Thomas and Collier (1995) contend that it entails a long time to indicate proficiency in a bilingual programme. Collier (1995) believes that we have to equally indicate all the elements such as socio-cultural process, language development, academic development, and cognitive development if we are determined to progress in developing high academic proficiency in second language. Collier in the area of planning pointed out five essential characteristics of a programme for second language learning (1995).

Francis' study of Nahuatl i-Spanish speaking students in Central Mexico, examined succinctly the development of bilingual proficiency in a school in which the native language was not applied as a means of teaching. The examination of the development of bilingual proficiency when the native language is not employed in teaching classroom settings "represents a different vantage point from which to conceptualize the models of linguistic interdependence, common underlying proficiency, and transfer" (2000, p. 170).

2.4 Relationship between Learning Strategies and Proficiency

Having experimentally worked on the learning strategies and language proficiency, researchers have explored a tangible relationship between language learning strategy use and learning proficiency (Cook, 1991; Ellis, 1994; Rubin, 1975; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Chastain, 1988). Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978) claim that successful second language learners think in the L2 language and point out the affective language learning strategies. In line with this, Rubin (1975) offered the following strategies of proficient L2 learners: (a) they are willing to make accurate guesses; (b) they would like to communicate; (c) they are ready to make wild guesses (d) they focus on both structure and meaning; (e) they benefit from all practice opportunities; and (f) they monitor their own speech and the speech of others.

Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978) tried to find what learning strategies the good and proficient learners adopt. They revealed the following broad strategies:

1. They find a learning style that suits them.
2. They involve themselves in the language learning process.
3. They develop an awareness of language both as a system and as communication.
4. They pay constant attention to expanding their language knowledge.
5. They develop the L2 as a separate system.
6. They take into account the demands that L2 learning imposes.

Among the models of second language learning, Cummins (1979) and Cummins -and Swain (1986) have offered psycho-linguistically-oriented theoretical model of bilingual proficiency which has received great support over the last 20 years. Proficiency of language has been regarded by second language instructors and programme designers to remove the problems of language minority learners. Moreover, Collier (1995) added that every L1 learner creates language proficiency for face-to- face daily conversation called conversational language or fluency of surface-level or main fluency in the first language.

Cook claimed learners who are good and proficient in language use might acquire L2 through different strategies.

On the other hand, learners with low proficiency might not behave like the good learners and if they behave the same as the good learners do, they may not learn language efficiently (1991).

Stem (1992) presented four sorts of goals for language learners namely, proficiency goals, cognitive goals, affective goals, and transfer goals.

Carter and Nunan (2001) argue that learner placement in certain programs entails getting information about their general language proficiency and prior educational experiences. Johnson and Johnson (1999) argue that in addition to language learning studies and consequent learner strategy, there is some other empirical work that identifies the kinds of learning strategies.

Naiman, Frohlich and Todesco (1978) referred to such factors as motivation, career/academic specialization, sex, culture background, nature of task, age and stage of language learning that have been proved to influence second language learning.

Brown, Bransford, Ferrara and Campione (1983) mentioned other factors including maturity, comprehension of learning style preferences of oneself (visual, auditory, etc.), and previous experience that helps distinguish experts from novices. Based on non-L2 research, proficient language learners often use metacognitive strategies such as organizing, evaluating, and designing their learning. The employment of these activities mixed with cognitive strategies such as analyzing, reasoning, transferring information, taking notes, and summarizing is probably a definition of effective learning. Dansereau (1985) and McCombs (1988) stated that some other-non-L2 strategy research has proved that adopting emotional (affective) and social learning strategies are those strategies used by the best learners so that they would control their emotions, to remain motivated, to cooperate, and to get help. Finally, in the implications of learning-strategy research about ESL teaching, Oxford (1990b) claimed that proper learning strategies application can lead to second language proficiency.

Having studied all about the learning strategies and proficiency use, the researchers have posed the following questions for the present research:

1. Is there any relationship between the strategy use and the proficiency level of the language learners? If so, what relationship is there between language proficiency use and the language learning strategies?
2. What helpful strategies do the language learners select correspondent to the level of their proficiency?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 90 university students majoring in TEFL at Payame-Noor Universities of Khoramshar and Abadan (two cities in Khouzestan province, Iran). They were selected based on a proficiency test and they were randomly assigned to three groups as elementary, inetermediate and advanced.

3.2 Instruments

A simulated proficiency test extracted from a sample TOEF test (Bailey, Seetharaman, Gavin, Shukla, Penfield and Subramanian, 1993, pp. 547-563) administered in the first step. This proficiency test consisted of 70 multiple choice items including vocabulary, structure and reading comprehension. The test included 31 structural items, 26 vocabulary items and three short reading comprehension texts including 13 reading comprehension questions. Table 1 presents a summary of the components of the proficiency test.

Table 1. Components of proficiency test

never true of me	means	1
rarely true of me	means	2
sometimes true of me	means	3
usually true of me	means	4
always true of me	means	5

The second instrument used in this study was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or (SILL) (Oxford, 1990b). It was a 50-item version for learners of English as a second or foreign language. The SILL asks students to report, on a five-point scale, the frequency of the use of six different categories in terms of how often they use certain strategies. The SILL is in the form of statements. The participants graded their answers on the scale from one

to five points.

The SILL contains six parts. Each part is related to one category of strategies: statements one through nine refer to memory strategies, statements ten through twenty three refer to cognitive strategies, statements twenty four through twenty nine refer to compensation strategies, statements thirty through thirty eight refer to metacognitive strategies, statements thirty nine through forty four refer to affective strategies, and statements forty five to fifty refer to social strategies. Table 2 summarizes the number of items related to each strategy type.

Table 2. Strategy grouping according to the six strategy types

Strategy Types	Items	Total
Memory	1-9	9
Cognitive	10-23	14
Compensation	24-29	6
Metacognitive	30-38	9
Affective	39-44	6

3.3 Procedure

In order to collect some data about the percentage of the language learning strategies applied by the students, they were requested to initially participate in the TOEFL test and then to accomplish SILL. In order to select language learners from different proficiency levels, the above-mentioned simulated proficiency test was administered to ninety students. Participants were advised to leave no statements unscored since they were not penalized for their wrong answers. This enabled the researcher to pigeonhole language learners into three proficiency levels of elementary, intermediate and advanced levels. First of all, the proficiency test was rated and the testees who had scored above 64% were classified as the advanced group, those who scored between 33% and 64% correctly were grouped as intermediate learners, and those who answered below 33% of the questions correctly were classified as elementary learners. The results of the proficiency test helped form three groups representing different proficiency levels: advanced learners 11, intermediate learners 42 and elementary learners 37.

Having answered the TOEFL tests, during the second session, the students were requested to rate the statements in SILL by grading them from 1 to 5 based on the strategies they adopt while learning EFL. Some of the statements were explained to those students who could not understand what they were asked.

The SILL was rated via the numbers assigned to the frequency of each preference, that is never was 1, rarely 2, sometimes 3, usually 4 and finally 5 for always was determined. Then the boundary of each strategy was determined and the frequency of all the strategies rated by the learners was calculated, and then the mean of each group of strategies was obtained via the division of the whole number of each group on the frequency of them.

4. Results

The descriptive statistics related to the participant's proficiency test of TOEFL of language learning students, measured via a discrete-point test is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics related to the TOEFL test

Mean	SD	V
28.288	11.288	126.97

As Table 3 shows, the testees were initially rated, and then their scores were ranked. Finally, the mean (28.288), standard deviation (11.268) and variance (126.97) of the scores were calculated. Table 4 presents the groups' performance on the proficiency test.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the three groups of proficiency test

Group	Number	Percentage
Advanced	11	12.2%
Intermediate	42	46.6%
Elementary	37	41%
Total	90	100%

As the Table 4 shows 12.2% of the learners were classified as the advanced learners, 46.6% of the learners were classified as intermediate group and 41 % of the learners were placed in the elementary group. The statistics presented in the table above, as well, presented the number of the three groups as: advanced learners 11, intermediate learners 42 and elementary learners 37.

In the next step the descriptive statistics related to the participant's reported preferences of language learning strategies (LLSs), measured through the strategy questionnaire (SILL), are represented in table 5.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics related to the SILL

Mean	SD	V
163.66	39.02477	1540.0449

As Table 5 shows the mean (163.66) was obtained in order to find the variance (1540.0449) and through which the standard deviation (39.02477) of the SILL questionnaire was determined via running a statistical ANOV A. this statistics helped find the correlation co-efficient (covariance or p) between the mean of the proficiency test scores and the mean of the rated questionnaires of SILL. Therefore, the co-efficiency correlation was estimated through covariance to find the relationship between the strategy use and the proficiency level. The result was positive, i.e. $p = 0/91$ which shows there is a direct relationship between them. Figure 1 below also represents the correlation co-efficient between the SILL and proficiency test.

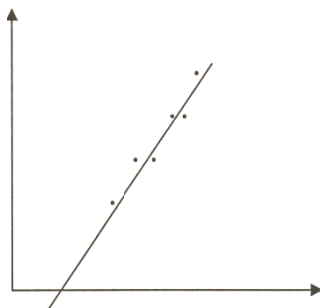


Figure 1. Correlation between SILL and proficiency test ($p = 0/91$)

Table 6 represents the percentage of the different strategies used by the advanced group of the language learners.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the strategies used by the advanced FLLS

Strategies	Percentage
Memory	9.09%
Cognitive	0%
Compensatory	36.36%
Metacognitive	36.36%
Affective	9.09%
Social	9.09%
Total	99.99%

As it is shown in Table 6, while about 36.36% use compensatory and met cognitive strategies at a high level, no learners in the advanced group made use of cognitive strategies. The other strategies were equally employed by the learners in this group.

Considering the intermediate level Table 7 represents the percentage of the different strategies used by the intermediate group of the language learners.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of the strategies used by the intermediate FLLS

Percentage	
7.14%	Memory
9.52%	Cognitive
4.76%	Compensatory
50%	Metacognitive
9.52%	Affective
19.04%	Social
99.98%	Total

According to Table 7, while about 50% used metacognitive as the highest strategy, 19.04% employed social strategy and cognitive and affective strategies were equally applied by the intermediate students and the lowest strategy adopted by this group was memory strategy.

Also regarding the strategies used by elementary group table 8 shows that in this group memory strategy was the most frequent strategy by 24% of the learners, and cognitive strategy was the second frequent strategy used by this group. The third useful strategy to this group was social strategy, and finally, metacognitive and affective strategies were equally important strategy to them. While, the least strategy applied was compensatory strategy

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of the strategies used by the elementary FLLS

Percentage	Strategies
24.32%	Memory
21.62%	Cognitive
2.70%	Compensatory
16.21%	Metacognitive
16.21%	Affective
18.91%	Social
99.97%	Total

To summarize, the results of the analysis also indicated that advanced learners predominantly opt for compensatory and metacognitive strategies. While compensatory strategies were almost ignored in intermediate and elementary groups, metacognitive strategy use increased rapidly, and then there was a slight downfall. As the learners' proficiency increases, the frequency of the use of the cognitive strategies decreases.

5. Discussions

Question (1): Is there any relationship between the strategy use and the proficiency level of the language learners? If so, what relationship is there between language proficiency use and the language learning strategies?

According to tables 3 and 5, and by comparing the variances of the obtained scores of the TOEFL and the scores of the SILL, the correlation coefficient was 0.91 which shows there is a relationship between the learner's proficiency level and the adoption of the strategies by the language learners. The findings of this study showed counter the findings of Politzer and McGroaty (1985) as they looked at the relationship between a range of good learning activities and the learner's proficiency level via using a questionnaire and gaining scores on an intensive course. They stated that the relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency level is observed not as a one-way direction leading from cause to effect, but rather as an ascending spiral in which active applied strategies assist students obtain higher proficiency. This study showed that there is a direct and strong relationship between learner's proficiency level and their application of the learning strategies.

The results of this study show that advanced language learners reach a compromise in using learning strategies. That is, language learners employ metacognitive and compensatory strategies with the same degree of frequency. In the

same vein, the other strategies, save for cognitive strategies, are also used equally. In other words, advanced language learners achieve stability in using strategies which is not found in the lower level language learners. The findings of the present study are in line with Bremner's (1999) and Vann and Abraham's (1990) that unsuccessful learners use strategies generally regarded as useful and appropriate in special situations. Successful language learners demonstrate greater consistency in applying effective strategies. Their findings proved that successful learners use a larger number of strategies, and use them more frequently based on their proficiency levels.

Hence, it is concluded that the relationship between the strategy use and proficiency level of the students is a direct relationship, that is, the more proficient the students are, the greater the number of strategies they use.

Question (2): What helpful strategies do the language learners select correspondent to the level of their proficiency?

According to the data analyzed and by taking another short look at the tables above which dealt with the descriptive statistics of the proficiency level (tables 6, 7, 8), this study delineated that the advanced group employed compensatory and metacognitive strategies most, and they equally applied memory, metacognitive and affective strategies after compensatory and metacognitive strategies, but cognitive strategies were not used at all. The percentage of the learners who used cognitive strategy was zero. The findings of the study correspond to Oxford's (1990b) who argues that compensatory strategy is the most frequent strategy adopted by the advanced learners, and metacognitive strategy as the second highest in rank. Bermner (1999) also argues that Hong Kong students use compensation strategies more than any other strategies. The findings of this study were different from O'Malley, Chamot and Ellis' (1985) reported that learning strategies adopted by the learners differ based on the tasks they are engaged in. They wrote that cognitive strategies were 53% used by ESL learners. Metacognitive strategies were 3% and social strategies which presented the cooperation with the other students and making questions to check understanding were 17%.

6. Implications

Language learning strategies play a vital role in the process of learning. The evidence has shown that learning strategies are strongly related to successful learning (Nyikos and Oxford, 1993). Therefore, language teachers are recommended to become familiar with language learning strategies.

As it was mentioned previously, language learning strategies have been discussed in versatile studies during the last decades. It has been proved that they have a significant share in acquiring or learning a foreign or second language. Therefore, teachers should be trained to instruct the strategies to their language learners. In Iran, language learning strategies have not been encompassed in the school syllabi. Each learner has his/her own way of learning regardless of any useful strategies, so their learning may not improve aptly. For example, some used metaconitive or cognitive and etc. In this regard, one implication is that language instructors and syllabus designers should be advised to inform language learners about language learning strategies.

Also, by taking a careful look at the strategies used by the advanced group of learners of this study it is understood that this group who are more successful in learning language use the most strategies and high percentage of compensatory and metacognitive strategies. Therefore, all of these fruitful strategies should be introduced to the language learners by the teachers in order to apply them in their learning process to promote their language potential appropriately.

Also this study will primarily be beneficial for language learners in their choice of learning strategies and teachers in enhancing their teaching. Initially, it will identify the useful language learning strategies applied by those successful English language learners under different academic language learning circumstances. Moreover, the study is expected to shed light on the possible relationship between the language learning strategies and the proficiency level of language learners. Eventually, the findings of this research can be applied and taught in the EFL/ESL classes to guide the poor language learners in eliminating their language learning problems so that they can promote their potential ability in language learning.

7. Suggestions for Further Research

This study assessed Iranian learners' proficiency level and its relationship with the strategy use. It tried to investigate whether there was any direct relationship between language proficiency and strategy use. Findings in this study did not bring into consideration factors such as gender, motivation, age, time and etc. These issues need to be further investigated.

1. The current research has just concentrated on the proficiency level of the learners. Continued studies can regard factors such as, gender, age, attitude and motivation in relation to strategy use.
2. The research was administered through the six major strategies relying on Oxford's strategy inventory. The

subcategories can be further investigated.

3. The present study was carried out at the university level. Replicated studies are recommended using junior and senior high school students and language institute learners. Findings of this study will not only clarify the focus in this research, it will also add to the generalizability of learning strategy research.

4. The participant-who took part in the study, did not have sufficient familiarity with language learning strategies (LLSs). Teaching LLSs would entail for an eye-catching investment of time for practice and discussion activities. Similar studies could be conducted to involve regular classroom teachers over a semester or year in the teaching of learning strategies to obtain better and clearer consequences.

5. In this study factors such as learning strategies and the proficiency level of the learners were' considered. Further studies might be carried out to determine other factors such as language teaching methods, language learning goals, testing methods, and new computer-assisted language learning technologies.

8. Conclusion

The following is a summary of conclusions relying on the analysis of the data collected in the study:

The data demonstrated that there is a relationship between the strategy used by the learners and the level of their proficiency. The relationship between the strategy used by the language learners and their proficiency level is positive, i.e. there is a direct association between them. The more proficient the learners are, the greater number of strategies they apply. The data showed that a considerable number of learners in the advanced group employ the compensatory and metacognitive strategies. Next in rank memory, affective, and social strategies. The percentage of cognitive strategy use was zero.

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