Investigating Language Learning Strategies in ELT

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Abstract

Learning strategies play leading roles on students' understanding information and solving problems. Not being aware of learning strategies and their use may lead to students' failure. Furthermore, conducting research on learning strategies is difficult as they are not observable directly and selecting a reliable method is an issue. Accordingly, this paper aims to investigate the significant contribution to the development of learning strategies within English Language Teaching (ELT) studies through reviewing three research-based related articles to adapt the findings to new research. The articles' framework, designs, and methods investigated to choose the appropriate ones for a new study and ensure the reliability and validity of it. Regarding different sections of this paper, it explains the learning strategies related to the new study and describes its pedagogical context. Moreover, it compares and contrasts the articles' research strategies and designs, methods of data collection and data analysis, validity, reliability as well as ethics. It also considers their shortcomings and discusses general implications for the new research project. Finally, it decides to conduct a case study design in a university setting in Iran consists of 22 undergraduate male and female students studying Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) motivated in acquiring English well. It will also employ mixed method research to collect more reliable data, apply think-aloud protocol and administer Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire, use descriptive and content analysis and cross-check the findings in order to recognize students' learning strategy usage.

Keywords: Investigating; Learning Strategies; Three Articles; Significant Contribution; Autonomous Learners.

1. Introduction

People differ in how they acquire a second language (Ortega, 2009). Dornyei (2005) believes individual differences play principal roles in second language acquisition. While a group of learners avoids details in learning, another group searches for minor details. Although some prefer group work, others learn more effectively when working alone. Learning style, learning strategies, and affective variables are factors include in learner differences. In addition, language aptitude, culture, age, gender, motivation, emotion and other demographic variables are significant factors in language learning (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003). Among these factors, the focus of the current paper is on learning strategies.

Learning strategies are actions and expressed through forms of verbs such as organizing, planning, and summarizing (ibid). They are what people engage in to overcome their learning process. Ortega (2009) mentions these learning strategies as conscious mental and behavioral procedures. The identification of learning strategies empowers the learners to manage their learning because learning strategies considered extremely powerful learning tools (O'Malley & Chamot, 1985). For instance, good language learners have control over their learning strategies while those who cannot learn a second or foreign language well have not recognized their strategies (Skehan, 1990). Having done reliable and valid studies, researchers can help the learners recognize the learning strategies and use them consciously when learning.

I am interested in this area because I intend to help the students identify their different learning strategies to improve their performances and increase their independence and engagement with learning. They will then be able to apply an appropriate strategy for each task to become effective language learners (Chamot, Bomhardt, El-Dinary & Robbins, 1999). In addition, I would like to help them realize that if they cannot perform successfully, it will be because of the use of ineffective strategies and not lack of their abilities.

Conducting research on learning strategies is difficult as they are not observable directly (Griffiths, 2004). Furthermore, selecting a reliable method is an issue. Scholars may conduct research into learning strategies to find whether there is any relationship between preferred learning strategies and educational level, first language, the level of English proficiency, ethnic background and so on (Wong & Nunan, 2011). However, I intend to carry on the research to identify whether the learners in my context use their learning strategies consciously, and which learning strategies they do not use and why. Having chosen three studies, I investigate their framework, designs, and methods to choose the appropriate ones for my study and ensure the reliability and validity of it. The first article is, "The Learning Styles and Strategies of Effective Language Learners" by Wong and Nunan (2011). "Strategies used by four Iranian EFL learners in reading ESP and GPE texts: A think-aloud case study" by Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) and "An investigation into the factors affecting the use of language learning strategies by Persian EFL learners" by Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) are the second and third articles. Wang and Nunan (2011) studied students in Hong Kong while two other groups studied students in Iran. They studied LLSs in different contexts so that I can analyze, compare and contrast them in order to adapt their procedures and findings for my research.

Regarding different sections of the present article, section 2 consists of the learning strategies definitions related to my study. Section 3 includes the description of the pedagogical context of my research. I will then compare and contrast three research articles conducted on learning strategies. The articles' research strategies,

research designs, methods of data collection and data analysis, validity, reliability, and ethics will be compared and contrasted in fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth sections respectively. Finally, I will discuss general implications for a research project in my context.

2. Learning Strategies

The study will investigate some language learning strategies (LLSs) such as cognitive, memory, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective and social among undergraduate students. The cognitive strategy is a mental process and when learning it helps the selection of relevant information and rejection of irrelevant one. It relates to recognizing, comprehending, organizing materials, summarizing, repeating, translating, using formulas and patterns, problem solving and interacting in the target language (Cohen, cited in Schmitt 2010). Memory strategy helps the learners to store and retrieve information. Moreover, it is involved in semantic mapping, grouping, representing sounds and images. Another strategy is compensation strategy that employed when learners need to continue the communication despite the gap in their linguistic knowledge. It helps them to make up the missing knowledge by adjusting the message, combining words or switching to the mother tongue (Oxford, 1992).

The meta-cognitive strategy involves in thinking about the mental process engaged in the learning process. In addition, it controls and regulates the learning plans and decides how to learn effectively, monitors and evaluates it (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Being able to use affective strategy, learners can control the level of anxiety, increase the motivation and positive thinking and improve their self-esteem. The affective strategy involves in emotional, motivational, attitudinal, and personal characteristic aspects of the learners. The last but not the least in the categories is the social strategy that is crucial because languages are social phenomena and learned to communicate with others. It involves in interacting with the speakers of the target language to improve the language, cooperating with peers and developing cultural understanding. In addition, those who do pair-work and group work in class make use of social strategy (Wasilewska, 2012 & Oxford, 1992).

3. Context

As an English teacher, I prefer collaborative learner-centered classroom so that I am interested in individual differences in general and learning strategies in particular. I intend to help my students be as autonomous as possible and, therefore, I will conduct research to find the type of learning strategies they use and the ones they do not. I will conduct research on LLSs in a university setting in Iran. The participants are 22 undergraduate male and female students who are studying TEFL. They are in the first year of the university. Their ages ranging from eighteen to twenty-two of Iranian nationality and Persian language background at pre-intermediate and intermediate level of the English language. They are eager in

acquiring English well. However, they have basic issues in their speaking and listening skills due to teaching and learning English issues in Iran. If they can identify their learning strategies, they can consciously use efficient techniques to understand new information, link it to the related existing data and then use it to learn effectively.

4. Research Strategies

In this section, I will compare and contrast the research strategies used by the researchers of the three articles. Wong and Nunan (2011) decided to conduct research to find whether there are any differences in the individual learning strategy preferences between more effective and less effective learners. They investigated independent and dependent variables. Regarding independent variable, they achieved the learners Use of English Examination's grade to group them into 'More effective' and 'Less effective' learners. Concerning dependent variable, they analyzed students' responses to strategy preference questionnaire. Consequently, they chose 110 participants among 674 students, 77 more effective learners and 33 less effective undergraduate university students in Hong Kong. They reviewed a variety of studies such as Rossi-Le (1995), Christison (2003) and Gan (2004) who carried out quantitative research on learning strategies and they followed them. Although they believed learning strategies were the specific mental and communicative procedures (Chamot, 2005 cited in Wong & Nunan, 2011) and for studying these procedures qualitative data collection could be useful, they conducted quantitative research. Accordingly, they carried out survey design since they had 110 participants and administering questionnaire was the most popular method of data collection for a large population (Oxford, 1993 cited in Wong & Nunan, 2011).

Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) conducted a study to examine the differences between reading strategies used by students while reading English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and General Purpose English (GPE) texts. They administered First Certificate in English (FCE) sample examination to students of one of the classrooms in an English language institute and selected four participants, three males, and one female based on the similarity of their scores. The participants majored in different fields of engineering, age ranging from 19 to 27 of Iranian nationality and Persian mother tongue at the upper-intermediate level of the English language. Unlike Wong and Nunan (2011), these researchers employed qualitative research because they intended to understand and elicit the participants reading strategy use and it was not possible through quantitative method. Moreover, they believed the qualitative method could be more reliable than a quantitative method for conducting learning strategies research (Grenfell & Harris, 1999 cited in Tabataba'ian & Zabihi, 2011).

Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) did research to determine the extent to which undergraduate students in Iran use learning strategies and the variables that

affect the choice of these strategies. They chose 196 undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student, 79 males, and 117 females, from 2 universities. They randomly selected the Participants from three classes of each university who majored in English, the native speaker of Persian and their age ranged from18 to 25. After administering Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to all of the participants, they divided them into high-proficiency, mid-proficiency, and low-proficiency English learners. They carried out quantitative research and investigated independent variable similar to Wong and Nunan (2011). Although Wong and Nunan (2011) grouped the participants into more effective and less effective learners, Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) divided their participants into high, mid and low proficiency learners. They followed some of Oxford's (1990; 1992) books and articles and conducted the quantitative research. However, in identifying more learning strategies employing mixed method research can be beneficial (Chamot, 2004).

In fact, Wong and Nunan (2011), Tabatabai'an and Zabihi (2011), and Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) distinguished the English level of their participants. Tabatabai'an and Zabihi (2011) employed the qualitative method. However, the other groups of researchers conducted quantitative method. Although mixed method strategy is increasingly important in English

language learning studies (Mackey & Gass, 2005, cited in Oxford, 2011), none of these researchers applied it. Chamot (2004) believes that employing mixed method research in learning strategies studies can lead to finding more learning strategies and variables affecting the strategies.

5. Research Design

Designing a framework for a study to achieve acceptable results is essential (Creswell, 2002). This framework is a detailed outline of how the researcher will collect the data. It also clarifies what instrument will use and how. In addition, how the researcher will analyze and interpret the findings (ibid) can be crucial.

Regarding the articles, Wong and Nunan (2011) and Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) administered different survey design to collect data that is a popular design in Education (Creswell, 2012). However, Wong and Nunan (2011) used two-part online survey. Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) used cross-sectional survey design since they collected data at one point in time and examined the participants' current attitudes (Creswell, 2012). On the other hand, Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) used a case study design because they wanted to focus on the activity involving four people, a small group of participants.

By employing survey design, researchers can collect much data from many people that is inexpensive and standardized. Nonetheless, it is inflexible and includes issues with validity. Concerning inflexibility, it is not possible to correct or change a question when it seems confusing. It also has validity problem since the

participants have to choose one of the options in each question item and cannot give their opinions (ibid). On the other hand, thinking aloud method provides rich qualitative data and it allows first-hand insight into the thought processes associated with various tasks, although it takes time and only works as long as the participants verbalize their actions and they are sometimes resistant to verbalizing problems (Erickson & Simon, 1985).

6. Methods Of Data Ccollection

Finding reliable answers to the research questions requires an appropriate method of data collection. No matter quantitative or qualitative data, the important issue is to what extent the collected data help the researcher answer the research questions (Creswell, 2012).

As mentioned before, Wong and Nunan (2012) used an online survey design to collect data. They used a two-part online questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire asked the participants about their biographical and attitudinal information such as their field of study, year of study and their English background. The second part consisted of a thirty-item four-point scale questionnaire that searched for participants' attitude towards thirty key strategies they used inside and outside of the classroom such as 'In English class, I like to learn by games', or 'At home, I like to learn by watching TV in English', and they could mark 'no, a little, good, best.' The participants sent the two-part questionnaire online to complete it.

However, Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) who chose to do a case study, collected data through 'Think-aloud procedure' that is a technique to investigate learning strategies. The procedure consists of thinking aloud while completing a task. It helps the researchers identify the kind of strategies the learners use to do the task (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). The researchers selected four ESP texts based on participants' field of study and one GPE text from sample TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Each participant read two texts, a GPE, and an ESP. They talked about whatever went on in their mind while they were doing the task. Accordingly, the researchers recorded the data and then transcribed the recordings.

Data collection took three weeks for Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008). They administered SILL (Oxford, 1990:293-300) consisted of 50 items five-point Likert-scale and motivation questionnaires (Salimi, 2000) which were the 36-item five-point Likert-scale, ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

In sum, Wong and Nunan (2012) and Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) employed the quantitative method of data collection and administered different types of questionnaires while Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) applied qualitative method of data collection and used think-aloud protocol.

7. Methods of Data Analysis

Having collected quantitative or qualitative data, the researchers will decide what method of data analysis to choose. If quantitative, set of mathematical procedures used called statistics. On the other hand, qualitative data analysis is a little complicated since there is no single principle for it (Dornyei, 2007).

Wong and Nunan (2011) used a chi-square analysis. When researchers want to find if the relationship between two or more variables is independent, they use chi-square analysis (Richards & Schmidt 2010). These researchers wanted to determine any independent relationship between the levels of the participants' English knowledge and the learning strategies they used. The result of chi-square analysis showed differences between the effective learners' preferred strategies and ineffective learners' preferred strategies. It revealed that more effective students were communicative-oriented while less effective learners were authority oriented and dependent on the teacher and the textbook. Actually, only the statistical results were not enough.

Similarly, Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) used descriptive statistics to analyze their data to identify if their participants were low, mid or high strategy users. Moreover, they used different Multiple Regression Analysis to identify whether the use of language learning strategies might be predictable through the interaction of the independent variables. The data analysis revealed that the participants were moderate strategy users. Furthermore, they used meta-cognitive strategies significantly higher than the other strategies and memory strategies lower than the others did.

Unlike foregoing researches, Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) analyzed their data qualitatively and identified the strategies used by the participants according to O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) model of learning strategies. After transcribing the recorded data, they considered each utterance to identify a strategy. They then compared and contrasted the strategies the participants used for ESP and GPE. The result showed that the participants used cognitive strategies in reading both ESP and GPE texts and never used socio-affective strategies. They also observed when the participants read ESP and GPE texts the types of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies they used for each differed.

In general, findings from quantitative analysis can be objective, and generalized to a larger population while in qualitative analysis findings may be subjective and generalized to a wider population. However, the qualitative data is richer than quantitative data and both of them essential in LLSs research to achieve results that are more acceptable.

8. Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

The process of data collection should be examined to be convinced of validity and reliability of the collected data (Bell, 2010). Since Wong and Nunan (2011) did quantitative research and they administer the questionnaire, a test-retest

procedure could support the reliability of their data collection (Best and Kahn, 2006; Bell, 2010) or use triangulation method. The test-retest reliability consists of administering one version of the instrument twice at a different time interval and each participant in the study will complete the instrument twice (Creswell, 2011).

For enhanced validity, Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) translated the questionnaire into Persian to ensure that the participants thoroughly understood the content of the questions. Two Doctor of Philosophy (PhD.) candidates from Foreign Language and Linguistics faculty translated back the questionnaire into English. The points of discrepancy then discussed and modified. The reliability measured by the test-retest method. The questionnaire administered to thirty of the participants within a period of two weeks. It indicated an acceptable range of reliability.

Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) who conducted qualitative method might not have checked validity and reliability since they indicated nothing. They could crosscheck their findings by employing another method of data collection (Bell, 2010) to overcome each method's weaknesses (Blackstone, 2012).

Although two groups of researchers administered standardized questionnaires and one group administered test-retest to increase the reliability, it will be convenient to triangulate the data through conducting more than one method of data collection and then crosscheck the findings (Bell, 2010) to end up with a comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

Regarding ethical issues, educational researchers need to anticipate them throughout the research process especially during data collection. Furthermore, every participant of the study has a right to be informed about the purpose, and procedure of the study before participating in the study and he or she also has a right to ask questions about the study, continue or withdraw if desired (Creswell, 2012). In fact, Wong and Nunan (2011) mentioned nothing related to ethical issues, ethical process, and informed consent. Similar to Wong and Nunan (2011), Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) and Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) did not say anything about their ethical issues.

9. General Implications for a Research Project in My Context

Theoretically speaking, identifying LLSs seem to be a solution for English Language Teaching and Learning issues. Removing the traditional way of learning is not an easy task. More research should be done to recognize the variety of strategies learners use to learn effectively. Furthermore, language classrooms ought to focus on both teaching and developing learning. Learners need to identify their LLSs according to their objectives. Moreover, teachers need to explore what strategies the learners use for each objective. Teachers can try to train as autonomous learners as possible. Autonomous learners are able to evaluate the practicality of a strategy critically. They can also choose the appropriate strategy for a task and successfully transfer it to a new task (Chamot, 2004).

Having investigated three aforementioned articles, I have compared and contrasted their strategies, deign, methods of data collection, methods of data analysis, validity, reliability and ethics to adapt for my current research. I have also considered their shortcomings.

9.1 Research Strategy

I will mix qualitative method from Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) and quantitative method from others since mixed method strategy can be more valid to collect data that is more reliable (Creswell, 2012; Chamot, 2004; Oxford, 2011).

9.2 Research Design

I will conduct a case study design for 22 students of a class.

9.3 Methods of Data Collection

I will employ think-aloud protocol similar to what Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) conducted and I will also administer SILL questionnaire that other two groups of researchers used. In this way, I can collect rich qualitative and quantitative data. I prefer to give a paper questionnaire to my participants to reduce the shortcomings of administering the online questionnaire and collect the data that is more reliable (Creswell, 2012).

9.4 Methods of Data Analysis

I will use descriptive and content analysis. I will also crosscheck the findings.

9.5 Validity, Reliability and Ethics

In addition to test-retest administration, I will also triangulate the data to increase validity and reliability of the collected data. Regarding the ethics, I will ask for permission from the university authority and then deliver consent letters to the participants.

Acknowledgements

I am using this opportunity to express my gratitude to Dr. Trevor Grimshaw, Director of Studies MA in TESOL at the University of Bath who supported me throughout my article. I am thankful for his aspiring guidance, invaluably constructive criticism and friendly advice.

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