The Effect of Iranian EFL Learners` Social Class on Their English Language Learning Strategies: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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Abstract: Language learning strategies play a crucial role in language learning. The choice of strategies is influenced by a variety of factors such as learning style, motivation, age, gender, attitudes, beliefs, type of task, L2 level, tolerance of ambiguity, cultural and contextual factors. This study was an attempt to examine the relationship between Iranian EFL learners` social classes and their language learning strategies (LLS). Two types of questionnaire: questionnaire of Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and a general biographical questionnaire as well as an interview and an observation were employed as the instruments for the data collection procedure. The questionnaires were distributed among 90 Isfahani female EFL learners enrolled in Iran Language Institute (ILI) to look for different strategies- if any -occupied by learners. To determine whether there was a relationship between social class and language learning strategies, an ANNOVA test was administrated. The findings revealed that (a) there was not a significant relationship between social class and the language learning strategies; (b) Iranian EFL learners were medium users of language learning strategies; (c) the cognitive category had the highest mean, followed by compensatory, metacognitive, memory, affective, and social; (d) in all social classes, Cognitive strategies were used at most; (e) and finally, in higher mediate and mediate class, students preferred to use Social strategies less than other categories while, in lower mediate class the less preferred category was the Affective one. It is suggested that educators and administrators can look for more trenchant factors that affect learners’ choices of language learning strategies.

Index Terms: language learning strategies, social class, socio-economic status

1. INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that choosing an appropriate strategy plays an integral role in learning. Language learning strategies (LLSs) are defined by Oxford (1990) as “operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information” (p. 8). Research on LLSs started in the mid 1970s. Many researchers were interested in determining what distinguished successful from unsuccessful language learners and thereby characterizing the features of successful language learners. So many studies have conducted on identifying the strategies employed by language learners to facilitate their learning. There is such research in Iran as well.

Accordingly, comprehensive lists and inventories for language learning strategies have been defined (c.f., O’Malley &Chamot, 1995; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991). The most widely used instrument is a questionnaire of Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). It consists of 50 strategies classified into six major categories, containing memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.
Memory strategies, like grouping, semantic mapping, or using imagery; cognitive strategies, such as repeating, analyzing, or summarizing; compensation strategies, like guessing or using synonyms or gestures; metacognitive strategies, like self monitoring, paying attention, and evaluating one’s learning; affective strategies like deep breathing and using music; and social strategies, like asking questions or cooperating with others, all facilitate learning (Oxford, 1990).

Language teaching is an interdisciplinary field with other areas such as Linguistics, Psychology, Sociology and Culture relevant to it. Increased interest in student-centered learning approaches among language educators has led to many studies investigating individual differences and their relationship to achievement in learning second/foreign languages (Cohen, 2011; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Oxford, 1992; Macaro, 2006; Rose, 2015; Shatz, 2014). Learner differences include language learning strategies (LLS) and social class of living beside other factors. These two areas were the focus of the current article. Other major areas of individual differences relate learning aptitude, gender, culture, age, and other demographic variables, but this study had inadequate space to deal with these factors. Moreover, teachers and educational researchers have particularly attended the issue of individual differences among language learners. One of their concerns is that why language learners do not perform similarly in language learning activities while they are presented the same methodology with the same books.

Therefore, learners may differ from each other in the goals, styles and strategies they set for learning a foreign language and the degree to which they control or direct the mental processes involved in language learning.

Social relevance refers to the need for teachers to be sensitive to the societal, political, economic, and educational environment in which L2 learning takes place. Any serious attempt to understand L2 learning necessarily entails an understanding of social context as an important variable (Beebe, 1985; Berns, 1990; Breen, 1985; Kachru, 1985; Lowenberg, 1990; Wong Fillmore, 1989). L2 learning is not a discrete activity; it is embedded in the larger societal context that has a profound effect on it. The social context shapes various learning issues such as the motivation for L2 learning, the goal of L2 learning, the functions an L2 is expected to perform at home and in the community, the availability of input to the learner, the variation in the input, and the norms of proficiency acceptable to that particular speech community. It is impossible to insulate classroom life from the dynamics of social institutions. Teaching, therefore, makes little sense if it is not informed by social relevance.

As a result, the researcher intended to measure learners’ social class using Bruce Quinn’s social class questionnaire, and also to investigate the relationship between social class with LLS in the context of foreign language learning.

Research on the frequency and type of LLSs in EFL contexts have been conducted in Iran with specific cultural background of learners, which differentiate them from those of other Asian countries. Findings of these studies will hopefully result in a more comprehensive understanding of LLSs. Accordingly, this study aimed to investigate the impact of Isfahanian learners’ different social class- low class, lower mediate class, mediate class, higher mediate class, and high class- on LLS to enhance their academic achievement.

2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Relatively much research is known about the characteristics of a successful learner. There is an investigation into successful learning named measuring the impact of learning orientation, a primary learner-difference variable, on learning by Margaret a. Martinez (1999) which in its introduction he cites some studies in which learning theories are missing and realistically require “a whole person view that integrates cognitive, conative, and affective aspects” for improved instructional solutions. The two researchers wrote that in the analysis of learning, educators cannot ignore or overlook the key psychological aspects that effect learning and performance outcomes. Otherwise, they both argued explanations about learning differences will be ambiguous and “isolated” from reality (Snow & Farr, 1987). Some socio-cognitive theorists continued the individual difference research with an ongoing investigation by examining how social learning situations and external resource and environmental manifestations influence and support learning and learning processes.

Other researchers, examining the differences between poor and excellent learners, suggested that there was great vari-
ty in the way individuals used psychological processes to learn (Coop & Sigel, 1971). For example, they explain that difference in the way learners, acquire, manage, retain, and generate new knowledge is not necessarily due to difference in intelligence or ability but also to cognitive differences in personal learning sets, knowledge, and abilities. Another factor important in learning is the environment which learners learn the foreign language, which may provide interactive learning that supports a "judicious mix of compatible and conflicting experience" (Brown, 1987, p. 105).

Singleton (1991) defines the impact of culture as follows:

There are, in every society, unstated assumptions about people and how they learn, which act a set of self-fulfilling prophecies that invisibly guide whatever educational process may occur there. They act as a kind of unintentional hidden curriculum, or what an anthropologist might call a cultural theory of learning. (p. 120)

Bedell (as cited in Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) also summarized the findings of a number of studies and showed that different cultural groups use particular types of strategies at different frequency levels.

Another research on this topic was done by Riazi and Rahimi (2005) that reported the results of an investigation into Iranian EFL learners’ perceived use of language learning strategies (LLSs). Participants were 220 female and male English major university students who filled out the SILL. The results of the study showed that Iranian EFL learners were medium strategy users overall while with regard to strategy categories they used metacognitive strategies with a high frequency; cognitive, compensation, and affective strategies with a medium frequency, and memory and social strategies with a low frequency. In the Literature Review of this article many studies were mentioned from different parts of the word such as, Watson-Raston (2002) studying the learning style of students from Southeast Asian countries, Reid (1987) who has studied the east Asian learning styles and transformational leadership.

As mentioned above there have been many studies on strategies used by learners all around the world focusing on the learner’s culture and environment, but they are all in places other than Esfahan. On the other hand, different strategies in different places of a city have not been investigated yet.

Since the culture among people in traditional places of Esfahan is different from those who live in modern parts with higher social class, the strategies used by learners may be different. This is the reason the researcher tries to investigate the most frequent strategies used by Istahanian EFL learners and the possible impact of location of living on them.

In particular, the study aimed to answer to the following research questions:
1) Is there any relationship between the learners’ social class and the strategies used by Iranian EFL learners?
2) Which strategies of the SILL, are reported to be used most frequently and least frequently by Iranian EFL students?
3) Which strategies are used in different social classes among Iranian EFL learners?

3. METHOD

3.1 Design of the Study

The study was exploratory and descriptive. There was not any control of variables and the independent variable was not manipulated. Elements of the design were predetermined. In addition it was ex post facto, also known as causal comparative, and non-experimental. In another word, this study was a casual-comparative one in which the relationship between different kinds of strategies was explored. It was attempted to show causes and consequences after they had occurred, but no causal inferences could be drawn and there was no manipulation of independent variables.

3.2 Participants

The broad aim of the project was to investigate the relationship between social class and strategies learners occupy. Bruce Quinn’s Social Class Questionnaire and Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) designed by Oxford (1990), were administered to 90 female participants. Male students were not participated in this study, because according to previous studies sex is an influential factor regarding the type of strategy used by learners. The participants were randomly selected. They were all young adults and their ages ranged between 12 and 14. The participants of the current study were from different geographic regions of Esfahan, representing Persian as their first language.
Table 3.1

**Demographic Background of the Participants**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Participants</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>12-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Background</td>
<td>Middle School Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Proficiency</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
<td>Low Mediate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Mediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Tongue</td>
<td>Persian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.3 Instruments

Students’ endorsement of use of LLS was assessed using the version 7.0 of SILL developed by Oxford (1990). The 50 quantitative, closed-ended items SILL was used to measure participants’ different use of LLS. The SILL contains six factor-analytically created strategy categories: Memory-related, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective, and social. The Persian translation of the SILL questionnaire was developed and validated by Fazeli (2012).

To clarify the method of scoring, it is valuable to give some examples of items: “I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.” (Memory); “I use the English word I know in different ways.” (Cognitive); “If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.” (Compensatory); “I practice my English with other students.” (Social); “I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.” (Affective); “I plan my schedule so I have enough time to study English.” (Metacognitive). To respond to the SILL items, students were asked to indicate their answers on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = never to 5 = always).

### 3.4 Procedure

The analyses conducted in the present study were based on the data from three scale SILL and also Bruce Quinn’s social class questionnaire. To encourage participants’ truthful answers, it was emphasized that their responses would be confidential and privacy would not be violated. Participants were also told that there were no right or wrong answers to any of the questions and that honest responding was of great importance in the study. The participants were required to rate the items of the scale using a 5-point Likert Scale. A score was assigned to each answer which ranged from 1 “never” to 5 “Always”.

### 4. RESULT

#### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The result of Bruce Quinn’s social class is shown in figure 1. Among 90 participants 36 persons were located in upper mediate class, 33 persons in mediate class and the rest 21 persons in lower mediate class.
These three social classes were categorized according to income, parents’ level of education, and housing separately.

To answer the first research question, (is there any relationship between social class and the strategy use?), since the two variables of the study were continuous, thereby, the use of Pearson moment correlation has been justified. Table 2 below presents the correlation between social class and extent of strategy use. It can be seen that there is no significant relation between level of social class and the extent of strategy use (sig.>.5).

Table 4.1
Correlation of Social Class and SILL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Upper mediate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.264</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Mediate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.174</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower mediate</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

To answer the second research question (Which strategies of the SILL, are reported to be used most and least frequently by Iranian students?), descriptive statistics (mean) was used. Table 3 provides the means and standard deviations among the major variables of interest in six different categories of strategy. All means for the six strategy categories fell within the range of 20 to 52 which is defined by Oxford (1990) as low to medium use.

Table 4.2
Mean Strategy Use in the Six Strategy Categories by All Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>30.8000</td>
<td>5.34596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>52.6667</td>
<td>7.67591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensatory</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>32.9333</td>
<td>6.19195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>32.0333</td>
<td>5.30116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>22.6000</td>
<td>4.78936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>21.3793</td>
<td>4.04805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To answer the third research question (Which strategies are used in different social classes among Iranian EFL learners?), the descriptive statistics (mean) was used for each level of social classes and each category of SILL. The findings show that in all social classes Cognitive strategies were used at most. In higher mediate and mediate class students preferred to use Social strategies less than other categories while, in lower mediate class the less preferred category was the Affective one.

5. CONCLUSION

The overall findings of this study revealed that the level of social class does not have significant relationships with the learners’ LLS preferences. The results of other studies could be different from those of this study because of several reasons. For instance, social class could have been defined differently in different contexts and cultures by different researchers. Also, it could be because of homogeneity of learning context such as institute, teaching methods, books, and other learning facilities which naturally are different in different social classes and may affect learners’ achievement.

Moreover, the importance of social class in relation to education has been highlighted by the body of literature on academic achievement. So, another probable reason for finding weak or no significant relationship between social class and use of LLS among students in this study may be because, the learners have to pay a large amount of tuition fee, so they did not belong to low class. At the same time, none of them were qualified to be categorized as high social class, because none of them were of the family of high ranked politic. Therefore, the accessible sample for the researcher was categorized as low mediate, mediate, and high mediate and as a result the differences among social classes were not significant.

The present study, though not completely free from its own limitations and shortcomings, implies a number of helpful hints. These will shortly be discussed in the following. Although findings did not show a great difference in the preference of strategy subsets across social classes along with the findings of previous studies, careful examination of the individual items showed that students in lower class used less Affective Strategies indicating reluctance in sharing their feelings. Therefore, this finding should be stressed to the students of low class and they should be encouraged to reflect their emotions more. Teachers should help those students participate in more group activities, define clear goals and activities that will help them discover and improve their language learning strategies.

However, not only these would not make much difference unless the activities of the instruction are changed accordingly. Therefore, teachers too should be aware of all the language learning strategies and factors affecting them and prepare their lessons plans in accordance with them. Lastly, students should be informed of the broad range of strategy options available. Language learning strategies are not limited to the ones cited in SILL. There are many more strategies proposed by other scholars and still there may be more that have not been explored yet.

REFERENCES


