The Impact of Age on Using Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract

Since age plays an important role in learning a second or foreign language, the present study investigated how different students in different age groups used language learning strategies. The participants of this study were 94 Iranian EFL students from four educational levels and different age groups as, primary (10-12), guidance (13-15), high school (16-18), and university students (19-23). The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning was used as an instrument in the study. The results revealed that different age groups used different language learning strategies. Running a one-way ANOVA indicated a significant difference between age groups and using language learning strategies. Moreover, the outcomes of this study showed that in comparison with other learning strategies, compensation strategies used more frequently by guidance, high school, and university students. Among different learning strategies, social and affective strategies were used more frequently by university students. Therefore, teachers should consider age group preferences for using language learning strategies and adjust their teaching in a way to meet the students' needs in learning a second or foreign language.

Keywords: language learning strategies, age, educational levels

1. Introduction

Age and learning strategy uses are crucial issues in the area of learning a second or foreign language that have been mostly ignored in the instructional process. A large number of studies (e.g. Ehrman, 1990; Oxford, 1992; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Skehan, 1989) have explored these individual- difference variables in second or foreign language acquisition. Although numerous studies (e.g. Chang et al., 2008; Lai, 2009; Li & Qin, 2006) have investigated the role of language learning strategies which are used by second or foreign language learners, few studies have explored the role of age in using learning strategies. To this end, an investigation of the relationship between age and using language learning strategies is required especially in an EFL context.

This study aims at investigating the impact of age on language learning strategy use. In this case, the research question is as follows:

1. Is there any significant difference in using language learning strategies by Iranian students at four educational levels (primary, guidance, high school, and university)?

2. Language Learning Strategies

The investigation of successful uses of language learning strategies by learners is traced back to 1970s. There are different classifications for language learning strategies. Each of these classifications has specific characteristics and "provides researchers with insights into the grouping of language learning strategies" (Chen, 2014, p.145). Five primary strategy categories and some secondary strategy categories have been proposed by Naiman, et al. (1978). By primary strategies Naiman et al. (1978) refer to strategies used by all language learners, and the secondary strategies are those strategies used by some learners. In his paper, Chen (2014) refers to primary strategy includes "(a) an active task approach, (b) realization of language as a system, (c) realization of language as a means of communication and interaction, (d) management of affective demands, and (e) monitoring of second language performance" (p.145). An active task approach can include positive responding to learning, taking advantage of learning environment, and adding some learning activities to language classroom. In fact, realization of language is considered as a system to analyze the learners' problems, comparing first and second language, and analyzing the target language. Language is a system of communication in which fluency is emphasized over accuracy. "Monitoring L2 performance refers to constantly revising L2 system by testing inferences and asking L2 native speakers for feedback" (Chen, 2014, p.145).

Four main learning strategies are monitoring, inferencing, formal practicing, and function practicing (Bialystock (1978). To Rubin (1981), two categories for learning strategies are direct and indirect strategies. Learning is affected by direct strategies like "clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/ inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, and practice" (Chen, 2014, p.145). Unlike direct learning strategies, indirect learning strategies cannot help learning directly. They can contribute indirectly through "creating practicing opportunities and using production tricks" (Chen, 2014, p.145).

Learners use other types of strategies like social-affective, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies (Brown & Palinscar, 1982). Learning materials which are manipulated and transformed directly in some specific learning tasks are conducted by cognitive learning strategies. These materials are materials like, translation, deduction, recombination, contextualization, and elaboration (O'Malley & Chamot, 1985). However, learning process is under the control of metacognitive strategies which include self-management, monitoring, reasoning, selective attention, planning, direct attention, self-evaluation, and planning. Social- affective strategies are strategies which are used by learners for social interaction with others like cooperation with others, and some questions for clarification (Chen, 2014).

Oxford (1990) combined many of these learning strategies into a system. The system is popular and widely used to analyze language learning. This system includes direct and indirect strategies. These two strategies compensated and supported each other and helped learners to learn a second language (Oxford, 1990). While, memory and cognitive are sub-divisions of direct strategies, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies are sub-divisions of indirect strategies.

According to Chen (2014) mental processing of the language is related to direct strategies, and learners are able to enter the information into memory and retrieve new information with the help of memory strategies. Scanning, analyzing, and summarizing are language reception and production of meaning which are manipulated by cognitive strategies. Learners should overcome the shortage in their existing knowledge by the use of compensation strategies.

Language learning can be supported by indirect strategies. However, these types of strategies are not directly involved in using language. Learners have capabilities to organize and evaluate learning by the help of metacognitive strategies. The tasks which can be done by metacognitive strategies are concentration on leaning and planning, organizing and evaluating of learning. Affective strategies are types of strategies which can assist learners manage emotions and attitudes such as anxiety reduction, and self-encouragement. Communication with high proficiency level learners or native speakers and the increasing necessary knowledge for using target language are possible by social strategies (Chen, 2014). In the current study, the researcher will try to employ the classification of language learning strategies by Oxford (1990).

3. Age and Language Learning Strategies

It seems just a few studies (e.g. Lee & Oxford, 2008; Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989) have been done on the role of age in language learning strategies. Among earlier researchers in language learning strategies, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) investigated important factors which can affect selecting helpful language learning strategies by university students. The results of their study revealed that those students studied language for more than five years used communicative strategies more than students studied language for less than five years. Students who experienced learning English for at least four years tried to use conversational strategies than students with less experience in language learning. According to Oxford (1990), language learners with different ages used different strategies. In other words, older learners and high proficient learners used more strategies than younger and less proficient learners. A comparison of mature age and younger students in using language strategies was shown in a study by Devlin (1996). The results revealed that mature age students used metacognitive strategies than younger students. To Lee & Oxford (2008) discussing and asking with help are social strategies which can be used more by young students. In contrast, adult language learners seem to use more metacognitive strategies like organizing and planning.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 94 Iranian EFL students from four educational levels in education as primary school students, guidance school students, high school students, and university students. The primary school students were 10-12 years old, the guidance school students were 13-15 years old, the high school students were 16-18 years old, and finally, the university students were 19-23 years old. The entire primary, the guidance, and the high school students were chosen from an elementary school, a guidance school, and a high school in Shiraz, which is located in Fars province, in Iran. The university students were also selected from Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch. All 94 students were consent to take part in this study.

4.2 Instrumentation

In this study, the researcher used "The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning," EFL/ESL to examine the frequency of language learning strategies which are used by different Iranian students. According to Ellis (1994) The Strategy for Language Learning is "perhaps the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies to date"(p.539). The instrument included some subscales such as "memory strategies", "cognitive strategies", "compensation strategies" "metacognitive strategies", "social strategies", and "affective strategies"(Chen, 2014,p. 146). As the participants were all Iranian the instrument was conducted in Persian "to minimize the interference of their English abilities" (Chen, 2014, p.146) and to help the students to know the statements better. The students in all four groups were provided with a Likert type questionnaire with five options from "never true for me", "usually not true for me", "somewhat true for

me", "usually true for me", "always true for me". Then, the students were asked to respond each statement in the questionnaire.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Research Question 1

Regarding the research question of the study, Table 1 indicates that Iranian primary students preferred to use following learning strategies in order. They liked to use metacognitive strategies (M= 2.97), followed by memory strategies (M= 2. 90), social strategies (M= 2.86), affective strategies (M= 2.79), cognitive strategies (M= 2.75), and compensation strategies (M= 2.70). Guidance school students liked to use compensation strategies (M= 2.94), followed by memory strategies (M= 2.72), social strategies (M= 2.71), metacognitive strategies (2.70), cognitive strategies (2.68), and affective strategies (M= 2.48). High school students preferred to use compensation strategies (M= 2.94), followed by metacognitive strategies (M= 2.77), social strategies (M= 2.68), cognitive strategies (M= 2.67), memory strategies (M= 2.53), and affective strategies (2. 45). University students showed a preference for using compensation strategies (M= 3.11), followed by metacognitive strategies (M= 2.94), social strategies (M= 2.93), cognitive strategies (M= 2. 88), affective strategies (2.82), and memory strategies (M= 2.81).

Table 1. Using language learning strategies by different students

Strategy		Primary			Guidance			High school			University Levle	
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Memory	24	2.90	1.20	23	2.72	0.85	25	2.53	0.78	22	2.81	0.68
Cognitive	24	2.75	1.13	23	2.68	0.83	25	2.67	0.79	22	2.88	0.69
Compensation	24	2.70	1.12	23	2.94	0.89	25	2.94	0.87	22	3.11	0.73
Metacognitive	24	2.97	1.28	23	2.70	0.84	25	2.77	0.85	22	2.94	0.69
Affective	24	2.79	1.14	23	2.48	0.68	25	2.45	0.77	22	2.82	0.72
Social	24	2.86	1.17	23	2.71	0.85	25	2.68	0.81	22	2.93	0.68

N: Number of the participants   SD: Standard deviation

Running a one-way ANOVA indicated a significant deference between age groups and using memory strategies ($F_{(3, 559)}$ = 2.467, p = .034), cognitive strategies ($F_{(3,559)}$ = 2.657, p = .047), comprehension strategies ($F_{(3,559)}$ = 11.17, p = .000), metacognitive strategies ($F_{(3, 559)}$ = 3.467, p = .079), affective strategies ($F_{(3,559)}$ = 5.347, p= .001), and social strategies ($F_{(3,559)}$ = 3.0543, p=.039).

The results of post hoc test revealed that, in comparison with guidance school students, primary school students would prefer to use more memory strategies (p =.028). Guidance, high school, and university students would like to use compensation strategies more than primary school students (p = .000). Guidance school students used less metacognitive strategies than primary school students (p = .027). University students had a great preference for using metacognitive strategies than guidance school students (p = .045). The results of post hoc test also showed that university students preferred to use affective strategies than guidance (P = .024), and high school students (p = .007). University students also had more preferences for using social strategies than guidance school students.

Table 2. Post-hoc comparison of different age groups for using language learning strategies

Language Learning Strategy	Comparison (I)	(J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Memory	Primary vs	Guidance	.1134	.085	.768
	Primary vs.	High school	.21457(*)	.07508	.028
	Primary vs.	University	.06758	.0854	1.000
	Guidance vs.	High school	.11860	.06584	.856
	Guidance vs.	University	-.06793	.08530	1.000
	High school vs.	University	-.17765	.06589	.137
Cognitive	Primary vs.	Guidance	.00743	.08679	1.000
	Primary vs.	High school	-.01453	.08538	1.000
	Primary vs.	University	-.18674	.06426	.128

	Guidance vs.	High school	-.01756	.06939	1.000
	Guidance vs.	University	-.16513	.08465	.100
	High school vs.	University	-.16836	.07426	.179
Compensation	Primary vs.	Guidance	-.35345(*)	.06735	.000
	Primary vs.	High school	-.36436(*)	.06834	.000
	Primary vs.	University	-.43243(*)	.07686	.000
	Guidance vs.	High school	.00768	.07424	1.000
	Guidance vs.	University	-.07456	.06503	1.000
	High school vs.	University	-.07365	.07467	1.000
Metacognitive	Primary vs.	Guidance	.24345(*)	.07475	.027
	Primary vs.	High school	.13622	.07421	.582
	Primary vs.	University	.02543	.07234	1.000
	Guidance vs.	High school	-.12135	.07467	1.000
	Guidance vs.	University	-.2434(*)	.07238	.045
	High school vs.	University	-.12459	.07314	.854
Affective	Primary vs.	Guidance	.172579	.07889	.186
	Primary vs.	High school	.218486	.07346	.057
	Primary vs.	University	-.06357	.07416	1.000
	Guidance vs.	High school	.03517	.07349	1.000
	Guidance vs.	University	-.25673(*)	.07067	.018
	High school vs.	University	-.28253(*)	.08255	.007
Social	Primary vs.	Guidance	.05684	.08436	1.000
	Primary vs.	High school	.04572	.07843	1.000
	Primary vs.	University	-.17435	.07348	.4000
	Guidance vs.	High school	-.02678	.07435	1.000
	Guidance	University	-.23565(*)	.08673	.046
	High school vs.	University	-.18753	.07367	1.000

6. Conclusion

The results of the present study revealed that the use of language learning strategies is different with different age groups. The findings in this study are in line with the findings of Chen (2014) and Prokop (1989) studies. In his findings Prokop (1989) states that "there may be a natural developmental process in second language learning during which students spontaneously change their learning strategies as they learn to cope with the requirements of various learning tasks" (p. 40). Regarding the results of the current study, teachers should consider helpful language learning strategies and integrate them into regular languages classes for different age groups and teach in a way to meet the students' needs. Since language learning strategies can improve students' language proficiency, teachers should teach them by considering the age level groups. Based on the results of this study, the teachers should teach the learning strategies the students of different age level failed to use. Chen (2014) suggests "teachers demonstrate how to use the strategies of setting goals, planning, seeking practice opportunities, self-monitoring and self-evaluation. Next, students apply the strategies they have learned to the learning activities." Finally, the students should be able to self-evaluate their using language learning strategies and manage their own learning task.

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