A Study on Relationship between Gender, Learning Strategies and Achievement among Iranian EFL learners

Leyla Vakili Samiyan

Safir Danesh and Sama Foreign Language Institute Mashhad, Iran

Abstract

Achievement in foreign language learning depends on a great number of factors such as gender, learning strategies, learners' attitudes towards the target language, anxiety, school type and the like to name a few. Hence, this study intended to investigate the strategies used by EFL learners with the purpose of finding the degree and the domain of differences of the strategies used by different genders and disclosing the extent to which strategy use and achievement are interrelated. To this end, a related questionnaire as well as an S-test, were distributed among 445 first grader - senior high school learners from 17 high schools in Mashhad. The findings of the study indicated a significant difference between male and female students regarding using the learning strategies in the first place. As it showed, the learning strategies of Memory, Cognitive and Metacognitive are more frequently used by the females while social and affective strategies are more in males' favor. Secondly, it was proved that female students are more successful than male students in foreign language learning. Consequently, being aware of this differences between strategies based on different genders will help both teachers and students to achieve more success in learning a foreign language. Therefore, teachers, according to the research findings, are recommended to use for their pupils the learning strategies they will need for better achievement.

Keywords: Learning strategies, S-test, EFL learners.

1. Introduction

As communities started to interact more and more, the needs for other languages increased as well. English is currently the dominant communication means in every area of life, including science, business, entertainment, TV, internet and diplomacy in the world. Nowadays, English is considered as the most widely studied language in universities as foreign and second language around the world. As English is an international language, it is intensively taught and even many people are still trying to learn it all around the world. Therefore, Language teaching and learning have received considerable attention in developing countries, especially with the increasing need for global communication. This is because most quantitative studies comparing strategy use by different groups of students have tended to pay more attention to overall strategy use or to the use of broad categories of strategies than to differences in the use of individual strategies (Green & Oxford, 1995). Oxford (1990) divided the learning strategies into two main categories – direct and indirect learning strategies- each of which includes three subcategories. The direct strategies include: 1) Memory Strategy, 2) Cognitive Strategy and 3) Compensation Strategy. Indirect strategies are: 1) Metacognitive Strategy, 2) Affective Strategy and 3) Social Strategy. Six major groups of L2 learning strategies have been identified by Oxford (1990). These categories are as follow:

- *Memory strategies* such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, moving physically and reviewing in a structured way
- *Cognitive strategies* such as reasoning, analyzing, summarizing and practicing (including but not limited to "active use of the language)
- *Compensatory strategies* (to make up for limited knowledge) such as guessing meanings from context and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning
- *Metacognitive strategies:* for evaluating one's progress, planning for language tasks, consciously searching for practice opportunities, paying attention and monitoring errors
- *Affective strategies:* for anxiety reduction, self-encouragement and self-reward
- *Social strategies* such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers, and becoming culturally aware (Green & Oxford, 1995, pp. 264-265).

Poor academic performance does not have to mean that students are not able to learn English successfully; however it may be due to the fact that students avoid participating in class activities actively and avoid motivating themselves to learn English as well. Even it can be resulted from not using appropriate learning strategies while studying a foreign language.

The main goal of this study was to explore the learning strategies of the learners, among three different types of schools. In addition, in this study the three school types were compared in order to shed light on the fact that whether SAMPAD students are more successful in S-test and have more achievement in learning English? And the final goal of the current study is exploring the learning strategy which is the best predictor of achievement among students in State, Private and SAMPAD schools.

As above mentioned, there are a great number of studies which have compared strategy use by different groups of students and put more focus on overall strategy use rather than investigating each strategy separately. Therefore, this study attempted to take the gender and learning strategies in to account in order to show their effect on learners' achievement in detailed.

1.2. Research Questions

The very study tends to answer the following questions:

RQ1. Is there any significant relationship between gender and achievement in learning English?

RQ2. Is there any significant difference between gender and use of second language learning strategies?

Scholars (specially postmodernist) believe that *gender* is a completely different concept from sex and it is not a biological fact at all (OktayAslan, 2009). According to Butler (1990), the concept of gender is brought into being when it is the matter of performance. Gender is therefore not something you acquire once and for all at an early stage of life, but an ongoing accomplishment produced by your repeated actions (Cameron, 2004). Although the words gender and sex both have the sense 'the state of being male or female', they are typically used in slightly different ways; sex tends to refer to biological differences, while gender refers to cultural or social ones.(Oxford dictionaries, Language matters, 2014). Consequently social context, culture and the principles of each society shape gender identity of people accompanied with unique individual experiences. In the current study, the term *gender* is used following this conceptualization of gender which is defined as culturally constructed male identity and female identity, not the biological differences between males and females.

When learners start to learn something, they have the ability to respond to the particular learning situation and to manage their learning in an appropriate way. (Lee, 2010).Findings of numerous researches have shown that gender has a significant effect on the extent of strategy use. According to some scholars, women use learning strategies more often than men (Aslan, 2009; Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Green & Oxford, 1995; Lan& Oxford, 2003; Tyers, 2001; Oxford &Ehrman, 1995). Božinović & Sindik (2011), Have found that that women use memory, cognitive and social strategies more frequently than men. The same result was obtained by Aslan (2009). He declared that female students used more language learning strategies than the male students. Based on his findings, taking all the participants into account, more indirect strategies than direct strategies were used by the students while learning English.

" The findings revealed that in all the domains of the subscales, females were superior to male students in using language learning strategies, which indicated a different result according to the previous studies".

(Aslan, 2009)

Although many similar results have been found by other scholars and researchers, it is not logical to generalize these findings to all settings and contexts, because there are some other research studies that found the opposite results, e.g. Lee (2010) found that there is a significant difference in learning strategy use between male and female; that is, male tend to employ more strategies than female do. It is also cited in Aslan (2009) that "Tran (1988) discovered that Vietnamese women use fewer language learning strategies than men. Tercanlıoğlu (2004) also found that male students used more language learning strategies". This fact that females use learning strategies more frequently than males can be true considering the whole strategies. In other words, when it comes to subcategories of learning strategies, some strategies are used more frequently by males and some by females. Lee (2007) also mentioned that the mean of frequency of male learners in overall strategy use was 2.85, and the mean of frequency of female learners was 2.92; therefore, male learners presented less frequently in using overall strategy than did female learners. However female learners reported using cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social strategies more often than did male learners, while Aslan (2009) declared that females employ Memory, Metacognitive and Social Strategies more frequently than males. In another study by Lee (2010) males are reported using Cognitive strategies and Compensation strategies more frequently than females.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants:

Sample of the study consisted of 445 first grade-senior high school students from 17 high schools, five State (3 all-girls and 2 all-boys), seven Private (4 all-girls and 3 all-boys) and five SAMPAD (3 all-girls and 2 all-boys) schools in Mashhad, Iran. Their ages ranged between 12 to 14 years old.

2.2. Instruments:

To find out the learning strategy of the learners and to figure out the relationship between strategy use and English Language achievement of the students, two research instruments were used: A) a scale for language learning strategy (SILL) survey and B) a test to measure the achievement in language learning (S-Test).

3. Results

3.1. Reliability of inventories and Normality of the data

The reliability of the language learning strategies subscales and also the schema test was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The results can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. *Reliability and Normality of the Data*

Variable	Cronbach's alpha
S-test	.84
Memory	.79
Cognitive	.81
Compensation	.84
Meta-Cognitive	.78
Affective	.86
Social	.82

Chang (2002) reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.96 for SILL. Tahmasebi (1999) also found Cronbach's alpha of 0.77 for Persian version of SILL. In the current study an acceptable reliability was obtained reporting alpha value of 0.81 for Persian version of SILL.

3.2. Results of Data Analysis Regarding Research Question 1

The first question of the current research was "Is there any significant relationship between gender and achievement in learning English?" In order to answer this question, initially descriptive statistics are presented in the form of a table. Descriptive statistics for males and females can be seen in Table 3.2. As can be seen in the table, the mean score of females is 52.23 whereas that of the females is 55.02.

Table 3.2. *Descriptive Statistics of Male and Female participants' scores for s-test Mean Score*

	girl(G) / boy(B)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
S-test/83	dimension1 Female	275	55.02	13.993	1.070
	Male	171	52.23	14.205	.857

However, this only cannot indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between mean scores of males and females. To examine the difference between girls and boys, it is necessary to consult the results of Independent Samples Tests, which are presented below in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3. *Independent Samples Test of the Male and Female Participants for S-test mean scores*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
S-test/83	Equal variances assumed	.001	.970	-2.027	444	.043	-2.788
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.034	364.765	.043	-2.788

In the current analysis, the Sig. value was .970, which was greater than .05. Therefore, variances were equal. It also provided the t value (t= 2.02) which is higher than 2 and the degrees of freedom (df=444). From the table above, it is also observed that significance was .043, which was lower than .05. Consequently, it can be concluded that the difference in S-test mean scored of males and females was significant; which indicated that females were more successful (M=55.02) than males (M=52.23) according to their S-test mean scores. To state differently females have a better performance in English language learning than males.

3.3. Results of the Data Analysis Regarding Research Question 2

The second question of the current study was "Is there any significant difference between gender and use of second language learning strategies?" To this end, each of the six language learning strategies was compared between males and females separately.

Table 3.4. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Sample Test for Learning Strategies

Learning strategies		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Memory	Female	275	23.19	5.598	3.611	444	.011
	Male	171	19.58	5.065			
Cognitive	Female	275	24.00	6.04	3.611	444	.000
	Male	171	21.89	5.91			
Compensation	Female	275	18.87	5.253	.872	444	.439
	Male	171	18.43	5.021			
Meta Cognitive	Female	275	25.27	5.586	3.299	444	.001
	Male	171	23.54	4.968			
Affective	Female	275	14.72	4.222	8.236	444	.000
	Male	171	18.30	4.851			
Social	Female	275	16.86	5.988	6.326	444	.000
	Male	171	20.44	5.916			

According to Table 3.4, t value of memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies are higher than 2 and sign value is lower than .05. So we can conclude that there is a significant difference between male and female students regarding using these strategies.

As Table 3.4 shows, the mean of memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies for female students is higher than male students while the mean of affective and social strategies for females are lower than that of males. To sum up, it can be seen that female students use memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently than males, but male students use more affective and social strategies than females.

All these findings enable teachers to use appropriate learning strategies based on gender differences and also help them to improve the other useful learning strategies and try to steer clear of unnecessary and irrelevant strategies while they are teaching. All in all, the findings of this study indicated that females were significantly more successful than males in terms of learning a foreign language and they used more language learning strategies, which are found to be positively affected on achievement in learning the target language.

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