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The Relationship between EFL Learners' Self-efficacy Beliefs and Their Language Learning Strategy Use

Alireza Bonyadi[1], Farahnaz Rimani Nikou[2] & Sima Shahbaz[1]

[1] Department of English, Urmia Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran

[2] Department of English, Salmas Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran

Correspondence: Farahnaz Rimani Nikou, Department of English, Salmas Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran. Tel: 91-25-725-591. E-mail: ni.kou@hotmail.com

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Abstract

The focus of education has changed from teacher-directed to learner-oriented instruction in previous years. Majority of studies in the field of EFL/ESL learning involves issues relevant to learners and their individual differences. Therefore, the present study focused on some of these individual variables; namely self-efficacy and language learning strategies. This study aimed at exploring the relationship between EFL learner's self-efficacy and language learning strategy use. Also, frequently language learning strategies by EFL learners and the existence of a significant difference in their self-efficacy beliefs and strategy use due to gender and years of English study are investigated. A group of 130 first year university students consented to participate in the present study. The results of statistical analyses indicated that there was no relationship between self-efficacy and language learning strategy use. Moreover, metacognitive strategies are frequently used language learning strategies by EFL learners. In addition, there were no significant differences in both self-efficacy and strategy use due to gender. But, there were significant differences in self-efficacy beliefs and only in metacognitive strategies due to years of English study.

Keywords: self-efficacy beliefs, language learning strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Following the conscious recognition of the learner as an active participant in the foreign language acquisition (EFL) process in Cognitive Theory, learner variables have been the focus of EFL research (Dornyei, 2005). Among learner variables self-efficacy beliefs and language learning strategies are more focused among researchers. In the last past two decades, the research findings support the contention that learner's self-efficacy beliefs strongly affect their performance (Bandura, 1997). Due to the lack of enough information about self-efficacy which affects learning, storing, retaining and academic performance of learners, results of the present study can be fruitful for Iranian teachers and learners. Oxford (1985) noted that strategies of successful language learners can provide a basis for aiding language learners. Because Iranian learners have less information about strategies and conscious use of language learning strategies, the findings of the present study can help them to be more successful. Furthermore, there is no study showing the existence of a relationship between self-efficacy and language learning strategies in Iran. Therefore, the results of this study can assist teachers to use new information in their teaching program.

1.2 Importance of the Problem

In the past years, most of the studies were conducted from the learner perspective and learner has a vital role in investigations. So, learner variables such as self-efficacy and language learning strategies are worthy of exploring. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is a more consistent predicator of behavior and achievement than any other related variables. He noticed self-efficacy is the most influential arbiter in human agency and has a powerful role in making decisions. Also, he claimed learning new skills and performing them in authentic situations are much more related to self-efficacy beliefs than the other self-constructs. So, it is self-efficacy that helps us explain the reason of why people's behaviors are different when they have similar knowledge.

Another variable which has an important role in learning a foreign language is language learning strategies. From a teaching perspective, "unlike most other characteristics of learners, personality and general cognitive style, learning strategies are readily teachable" (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p. 291). Also, O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo & Kupper (1985) stated that learning strategies of proficient language learners applied to less proficient learners could have useful effects on facilitating the development of learning foreign language skills. Therefore, exploring the effect of language learning strategies practically affect English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL). By considering the lack of new information in this field in Iranian context and lack of enough information for teachers to know why university students do not have sufficient English learning skills, why they cannot make use of their English skills in authentic situations, why students do not acquire sufficient English skills and why students achieve or fail to achieve, the present study will try to provide more and new information about self-efficacy and language learning strategies and the existence of a direct relationship between them in both male and female students. Also, it will generate useful information about the existence of a significant difference in both self-efficacy beliefs and language learning strategies due to gender and years of English study. The present study attempts to answer the following research questions.

1.3 Relevant Scholarship

In recent years, great changes have taken place in the field of foreign language acquisition research. Researchers have focused on how people can learn a foreign language more efficiently. Interest in EFL has shifted from the teachers' teaching to learners' learning. According to this change in EFL, most of the studies have been from the learner's perspective. Researchers have identified some individual learner variables that affect learning outcomes such as learning style, age, self-efficacy beliefs, aptitude, motivation, educational experience and learning strategies. Among them learning strategies and self-efficacy beliefs are more focused topics.

Researchers have explored the utility of self-efficacy for understanding behavior for more than 20 years. Bandura (1997), one of the first to undertake research in this area, defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in his or her ability to perform a specific task or behavior. Self-efficacy is not a general quality possessed by individuals, but rather specific beliefs an individual may have around particular tasks or behaviors (Bandura, 1997).

The term language learning strategy is another individual variable focused by a number of researchers. The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek word strategia, which means steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war. The warlike meaning of strategia has unfortunately fallen away, but the control and goal directedness remain in the modern version of the word (Oxford, 1990). Language learning strategies are believed to play an important role in learning a foreign language. They may help learners in mastering the forms and functions required for reception and production in the foreign language and thus affect achievement (Bialystok, 1979). Oxford (1990) argued that much research have emerged focusing on language learning strategy in the last 20 years, because strategies are especially important for language learning as tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence.

1.4 Research Questions

Q1: What learning strategies are frequently used by first year university English students?

Q2: Are there any significant differences between self-efficacy and language learning strategy use and gender and years of English study?

Q3: What is the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and learning strategy use of first year university English students?

2. Method

2.1 Participant (Subject) Characteristics

The participants were from three universities: Azad university, State university and Payameh Noor university of Urmia. All of them were first year English students and their ages were between 19 and 22.

2.2 Sampling Procedures

The population of the study consisted of 210 students. A total of one hundred thirty male and female students randomly chose to participate in the present study.

2.2.1 Measures

In the present study, the instruments for data collection will include a survey of two sets of questionnaires. It will employ quantitative data collection that is each datum will be a number that represents quantity, category, or

rank. In order to assess the participants' self-efficacy, the Persian Adaptation of General Self-efficacy Scale developed by Nezami, Schwarzer, and Jerusalem (1996) was used. It was administered to assess the first year English students' self-beliefs. The scale consists of 10 items. Learners were asked to report on a scale of one to four. The choices are from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Numerous research projects in Iran and out of Iran have used the scale with reported range of internal consistency of α = .70 - .91.

The second questionnaire was Oxford's (1990) 50-items Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (version 7.0), which was used for researching about the frequency of learners use of 50 common strategies. The SILL was developed by Rebecca Oxford (1990). It has a five-point Likert scale format: learners were asked to report on a scale of one to five how often they use each strategy. The structure of SILL is based on Oxford's classification system, whereby strategies are grouped into six categories, each represented by a number of individual strategies (items). Memory strategies (items 1-9); Cognitive strategies (items 10-23); Compensatory strategies (items 24-29); Metacognitive strategies (items 30-38); Affective strategies(items 39-44) and Social strategies (items 45-50). This scale was then translated into Persian for the sake of clarity. It was received by several English teachers and translators in order to assure the accuracy of the translations. Therefore, the questionnaire was edited to ensure that the sequence of questions, spacing arrangement, the content form, and the physical appearance of the questionnaire were carefully checked. It appears that SILL is the most often used strategy scale around the world and the only language learning strategy instrument that has been checked for reliability and validated in multiple ways (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The translated version was piloted to 25 subjects. In this study the SILL questionnaire had an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.89 which was satisfactory.

2.2.2 Research Design

This paper describes a descriptive method of research. It includes a quantitative study of university students. All of the participants were randomly selected.

3. Results

3.1 Statistics and Data Analysis

After collecting the completed questionnaires, all the data were coded and then analyzed through the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS17.0). To be more specific, firstly, descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed to display the subjects' overall responses to the self-efficacy beliefs and strategy items as well as the backgrounds with regard to gender and years of English study. Secondly, t-test was conducted in order to show the existence of a significant difference in self-efficacy and language learning strategies due to gender and years of English study. Finally, Pearson correlation was conducted to determine the relationship between language learning beliefs and strategy use.

Descriptive statistics were used in order to answer the first question stating "which one of the learning strategies are frequently used by first year university English students?". Oxford (1990) suggests a mean of 1.0-2.4 and lower for "low", a mean range of 2.5-3.4 for "medium", and a mean range of 3.5-5.0 for high levels of strategy use. The current study uses the same scale in classifying the participants. Results of the descriptive statistics showed that the mean strategy use by the first year university students on the whole strategies was 3.62, indicating they were high strategy users.

The metacognitive strategies showed higher mean (M= 4.17) followed by social and cognitive strategies respectively and the other categories fell in medium strategy use level. Results of the descriptive statistics showed that metacognitive strategies were the most highly frequently used strategies (M = 4.17, SD =5.17) followed by social strategies (M =3.69, SD =4.16), cognitive strategies (*M* = 3.63, *SD* =8.00), affective strategies (M =3.42, SD =3.86), compensatory strategies (M =3.38, SD =4.14) and memory strategies (M =3.30, SD =5.29). Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for strategy category use

Learning strategies	Memory	Cognitive	Compensatory	Metacognitive	Affective	Social	Overall
N	130	130	130	130	130	130	130
Mean	3.30	3.63	3.38	4.17	3.42	3.69	3.62
Std. Deviation	.587	.573	.693	.574	.644	.693	.623

In order to test the second research question stating "Are there any significant differences between self-efficacy and language learning strategy use and gender and years of English study?", t-test was used. Based on the results of descriptive statistics, the present study indicated that the mean scores of self-efficacy for males and females had a slight non-significant difference. Also, there was no significant difference in participants' self-efficacy due to gender ($p = .169$, $p > 0.05$). The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 2 and the results of t-test are shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for gender and self-efficacy

	x1	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Self-efficacy	Male	34	3.05	.400	.896
	Female	96	2.96	.530	.585

Table 3. T-test for gender and self-efficacy

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Self-efficacy	Equal variances assumed	1.917	.169	.664	100	.508	.841	1.267	-1.672	3.355
	Equal variances not assumed			.786	37.104	.437	.841	1.070	-1.327	3.010

Further, the results for the existence of a significant difference in strategy category use due to gender, as presented in Table 4 revealed that, with the exception of cognitive and affective strategies, where the mean scores between the males and females were the same, the males and females showed a slight non-significant mean difference in their use of other strategy categories.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for gender and strategies

Learning strategies		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Memory strategies	male	34	3.15	.54
	Female	96	3.45	.63
overall		130	3.30	.58
Cognitive strategies	male	34	3.62	.55
	female	96	3.64	.58
overall			3.63	.56
Compensatory strategies	male	34	3.25	.66
	female	96	3.51	.71
overall			3.38	.68
Metacognitive strategies	male	34	4.24	.51
	female	96	4.10	.63
overall			4.17	.57
Affective strategies	male	34	3.43	.53
	female	96	3.41	.75
overall			3.42	.64
Social strategies	male	34	3.63	.66
overall	female	96	3.75	.72
			3.69	.69
Overall	Male	34	3.585	15.690
	Female	96	3.661	23.671
			3.623	
overall				19.68

Also, the level of significance for all strategies was more than 0.05. So, no significant difference was found between males and females in t-test results. Results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. T-test for gender and strategy use

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
memory strategy	Equal variances assumed	1.515	.221	-1.931	100	.056	-2.67317	1.38414	-5.41926	.07292
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.115	32.709	.042	-2.67317	1.26376	-5.24519	-.10115
Cognitive strategy	Equal variances assumed	.352	.554	-.130	100	.897	-.26341	2.03326	-4.29735	3.77052
	Equal variances not assumed			-.134	30.355	.894	-.26341	1.95948	-4.26324	3.73641
Compensatory strategies	Equal variances assumed	.172	.679	-1.467	100	.145	-1.54756	1.05459	-3.63983	.54471
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.524	30.396	.138	-1.54756	1.01527	-3.61989	.52476
Metacognitive strategies	Equal variances assumed	.741	.391	.912	100	.364	1.26098	1.38223	-1.48134	4.00329
	Equal variances not assumed			1.041	34.843	.305	1.26098	1.21153	-1.19896	3.72091
Affective strategies	Equal variances assumed	3.713	.057	.127	100	.899	.13659	1.07475	-1.99568	2.26885
	Equal variances not assumed			.156	39.605	.877	.13659	.87629	-1.63501	1.90818
Social strategies	Equal variances assumed	.459	.500	-.703	100	.484	-.74878	1.06554	-2.86278	1.36522
	Equal variances not assumed			-.737	30.786	.467	-.74878	1.01590	-2.82130	1.32374

Another individual variable to be considered was the years of English study. The existence of a significant difference in self-efficacy due to years of English study are indicated in Tables 6 and 7. In the present study, the descriptive analysis indicated that Learners who had studied English for a longer period of time have higher mean scores in self-efficacy scale. Results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for self-efficacy and years of English study

	x1	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Self-efficacy	Less than 3 years	61	2.85	.505	.737
	More than 3 years	69	3.093	.485	.655

Also, the results of t-test in self-efficacy scale illustrated that there was a significant difference between two groups: More than three years and less than three years. In other words, the participants who had studied English more than three years had significantly higher self-efficacy (p=0.017, p<0.05). The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. T-test for self-efficacy and years of English study

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Self-efficacy	Equal variances assumed	.192	.662	-2.438	100	.017	-2.395	.983	-4.345	-.446
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.430	96.229	.017	-2.395	.986	-4.352	-.439

As presented in Table 8, the mean score for metacognitive strategies in second group, more than three years, was more. Also, the results for the existence of a significant difference strategy category use due to years of English study as presented in Table 9 revealed that, there was a significant difference between two groups: more than three years and less than three years in metacognitive strategies (p= .019, p< .05). In other words, the participants who had studied English more than three years had significantly higher frequency use of metacognitive strategies.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for years of English study and learning strategies

	Strategies	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
memory strategy	Less than 3 years	47	3.359	.655
	More than 3 years	55	3.424	.598
Cognitive strategy	Less than 3 years	47	3.555	.597
	More than 3 years	55	3.706	.555
Compensatory strategies	Less than 3 years	47	3.44	.642
	More than 3 years	55	3.481	.766
Metacognitive strategies	Less than 3 years	47	3.978	.666
	More than 3 years	55	4.262	.539
Affective strategies	Less than 3 years	47	3.304	.701
	More than 3 years	55	3.509	.718
Social strategies	Less than 3 years	47	3.734	.738
	More than 3 years	55	3.744	.692
overall	Less than 3 years		3.57	.479
	More than 3 years		3.708	.410

Table 9. T-test for LLS and years of English study

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
memory strategy	Equal variances assumed	1.492	.225	-.521	100	.604	-.58414	1.12133	-2.80883	1.64055
	Equal variances not assumed			-.517	93.958	.606	-.58414	1.12986	-2.82752	1.65924
Cognitive strategy	Equal variances assumed	.407	.525	-1.323	100	.189	-2.12495	1.60565	-5.31052	1.06062
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.316	95.138	.191	-2.12495	1.61429	-5.32965	1.07975
Compensatory strategies	Equal variances assumed	2.370	.127	-.247	100	.805	-.21006	.84873	-1.89391	1.47379
	Equal variances not assumed			-.251	99.972	.802	-.21006	.83712	-1.87088	1.45076
Metacognitive strategie	Equal variances assumed	1.991	.161	-2.376	100	.019	-2.55513	1.07560	-4.68909	-.42116
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.337	88.341	.022	-2.55513	1.09350	-4.72812	-.38214
Affective strategies	Equal variances assumed	.022	.883	-1.445	100	.151	-1.22476	.84731	-2.90580	.45628
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.448	98.230	.151	-1.22476	.84565	-2.90288	.45336
Social strategies	Equal variances assumed	.734	.394	.005	100	.996	.00426	.85081	-1.68372	1.69223
	Equal variances not assumed			.005	95.250	.996	.00426	.85519	-1.69346	1.70197

Table 10. Correlations for self-efficacy and strategy use

		Self-efficacy	Strategy use
Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	1	.119
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.235
	N	130	130
Strategy use	Pearson Correlation	.119	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.235	
	N	130	130

In order to test the third question stating “What is the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and learning

strategy use of first year university English students?" Pearson correlation was used. The results of the current study display no association (r = .119, p = .235) between participants' self-efficacy beliefs and their use of language learning strategies.

4. Discussion

It seems that little attention has been given to the study of the relationship between self-efficacy and learning strategies among Iranian learners of English and little research has investigated issues regarding the significant difference of the variables, gender and years of English study in self-efficacy and language learning strategies in Iran.

The results of this study revealed that the majority of the participants were reluctant to use metacognitive strategies. The highest use of such strategies among Iranian students was similar to that observed among students of the previous studies (Oxford, 1990) but inconsistent with the most of the relevant studies which favoured compensation strategies as containing the highest use of the overall strategies. It is apparent that particular strategies may be culturally of more value to the students, and therefore preferred, or it may be that the educational experience of Iranian students leads them to prefer some strategies (e.g., Metacognitive strategies) over others.

Also, the results of the present study with respect to the existence of a significant difference of gender in self-efficacy were not similar with the findings of the previous studies (Oxford and Shearin 1994; Pajares, 2000), in which they have reported significant gender differences in self-efficacy. But the results of this study showed that there was no significant difference of gender in self-efficacy.

Moreover, our findings with respect to the existence of a significant difference of gender in the use of language learning strategy use support the results reported by Rahimi, Riazi and Seif (2004). However, the findings contradict those of previous studies that have reported a wider range of overall strategy use by females (e.g., Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). A possible reason for this absence of gender significant difference in strategy use might be the fact that the participants of this study were English university students. It is possible that the students' awareness of learning processes minimized the gender effect in the present study.

Also, our findings with respect to the existence of a significant difference in learning strategy use due to years of English study were consistent with the Oxford and Nyikos' (1989). They indicated that participants who had longer length of English learning had higher means in Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning questionnaire. In other words, students with more years of language study tended to use strategies more than less experienced students. The findings were not similar with the findings of Rahimi, Riazi and Seif (2004) in which they have indicated that years of language study appear to negatively predict strategy use.

Further, the findings of the relationship between self-efficacy and learning strategy use scores obtained by Urmia English students on self-efficacy scale and SILL were unrelated to each other. In other words, the results showed that Urmia university students' scores on the General Self-efficacy Scale did not correlate significantly with their scores on SILL questionnaire. Therefore, findings of previous studies on relationship between self-efficacy and language learning strategy use, which demonstrated a positive correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and learning strategy use were not replicated here (Magogwe and Oliver, 2007).

The findings of the study provide a greater understanding of the important role of self-efficacy and strategy use among EFL learners in general and Iranian learners in particular. This draws the attention of EFL teachers to encourage their learners to improve their self-efficacy and language learning strategy use by seeking the ways to increase their experience or years of English study. This should necessarily result in change in their beliefs and learning strategy use about foreign language learning.

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