The Relationship between the Use of Language Learning Strategies and Teaching Methods: A Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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This study examines the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the teaching methods used by EFL teachers in their classrooms. Towards this goal, a standard proficiency test, the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1985) and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Oxford, 1986-1990) were administered to 120 intermediate and advanced learners from two institutes in Shiraz that teach their students audio-lingually and communicatively. The results revealed that the order of the application of the strategies among the audio-lingual group (AL) and the communicative group (CA) was the same, excluding memory and affective strategies. Furthermore, comparing the means of the strategies employed by the two groups showed some inter-group variations among the students' use of these strategies. Implications and conclusions were included.

Key words: Language learning strategies, teaching methodology, EFL/ESL

El presente estudio examina la relación entre las estrategias de aprendizaje y los métodos de enseñanza utilizados por estudiantes y profesores respectivamente en cursos de inglés como lengua extranjera. Se seleccionó a un grupo de 120 estudiantes con nivel intermedio y avanzado de dos instituciones en Shiraz (Irán), una con un enfoque audio-lingual de enseñanza y la otra con un método comunicativo. Al grupo se le aplicó una prueba estándar de suficiencia así como una encuesta sobre estrategias de aprendizaje. Los resultados revelaron que el orden de aplicación de las estrategias era el mismo entre el grupo audio-lingual (AL) y el comunicativo (CA) excluyendo las estrategias de memoria y las afectivas. Más aún, al comparar los porcentajes de las estrategias utilizadas por los dos grupos se encontraron algunas variaciones dentro de los mismos grupos. Se incluyen consecuencias y conclusiones.

Palabras clave: Estrategias de aprendizaje de la lengua, metodología de la enseñanza, EFL/ESL

HOW 13, 2006, ISSN 0120-5927. Bogotá, Colombia. Pages 47-63

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Introduction

As a successful foreign language learner, a student should be able to understand the meanings of words, phrases, and sentences satisfactorily, as well as to express thoughts and ideas properly. To do all these, a learner may take advantage of different strategies. Strategies are referred to as those specific "attacks" made on a specific problem. They are the moment by moment techniques employed by learners to solve problems posed by language input and output. In this respect, two broad categories of strategies have been distinguished in the area of L2 acquisition: learning strategies and communication strategies. While the former refers to input and reception of messages from others, the latter pertains to output and transmission of messages to others (Brawn, 1994). Tarone (1983) noted that such a distinction is too difficult to make since comprehension and production can occur simultaneously. The focus of this study was on the first type of strategies, learning strategies, and its relation to the type of teaching methods employed in EFL classrooms.

Typically, learning strategies have been divided into three main categories: meta-cognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective. Meta-cognitive strategies are used in information processing theory to indicate an executive function. They involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process, monitoring of one's comprehension or production and evaluating learning after the completion of an activity. Cognitive strategies are limited to specific learning tasks and involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Socio-affective strategies deal with social-mediating activity and transaction with others (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985).

Interest in learning strategies is due in large part to increased attention given to the learner-centered instructional models of teaching. The use of language learning strategies (LLSs), on the one hand, can be related to a number of personal factors such as age, sex, and proficiency level. On the other hand, it is possible to look for some links between LLSs and environmental factors like the dominant methodology used by the teacher in the classroom.

As such, the objectives of the study were first to find out if there exist any differences in the use of learning strategies among EFL learners being taught English audio-lingually or communicatively and second, if the response were positive, to investigate to what extent and in what kinds of learning strategies the differences occur.

To achieve such goals, two groups of language learners from two institutes, the Iran Language Institute (ILI) and the Shiraz University Language Center (SULC) that teach their students audio-lingually and communicatively respectively, were chosen to participate in this study. To these subjects, two types of test were administered: An Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1985) which placed the subjects into two levels – intermediate and advanced – was used; the second instrument was Oxford and Stock's (1995) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to determine to what extent and what type(s) of strategies each group would use more. Based on the number of strategies selected and reported by the subjects, our data were collected and subjected to certain statistical analyses to look for differences between the two groups. The results showed that there existed inter-group variations in terms of the use of learning strategies examined and the teaching methods used by the EFL teachers. Following the findings of this research, certain conclusions were drawn.

Background

Anthony (1963), Richards and Rodgers (1986), Richards, Platt and Platt (1992), Brown (1994), and Rodgers (2001) presented a number of definitions about method and methodology. A more or less classical formulation was suggested by Rodgers (2001) that considers methodology as the link between theory and practice and includes a number of instructional design features. These design features in turn might encompass stated objectives, syllabus specifications, types of activities, roles of teachers, learners, materials, and so forth.

Regarding schools of language teaching methodology, there have always been rises and falls of various methods. The period from the 1950s to the 1980s has often been referred to as "The Age of Methods," during which a number of quite detailed prescriptions for language teaching were proposed. The Audio-lingual method developed as a result of the influence of behaviorism, along with contrastive linguistics and structuralism. Brown (1994) presents the characteristics of AL method in a list including these:

- There is dependence on mimicry, memorization of set phrases, and over learning.
- Structures are sequenced by means of descriptions presented by contrastive analysis and taught one at a time.
- Successful responses are immediately reinforced.

- There is a tendency to manipulate language and disregard content.

Because the Communicative Approach and the term communicative have been invested with so many meanings as Widdowson (1978b) explains, there are various versions of it, but the one whose theoretical framework is associated with American sociolinguists like Hymes and British linguists like Halliday has become so wide-spread and regarded as the 'standard' model. Five characteristics of standard CA are as follows:

- The teaching of appropriateness
- The centrality of message-focus
- Simulating psycholinguistic processes
- The importance of risk taking skills
- The development of free practice techniques

Having looked at the major properties of the two teaching methods under investigation in our study, we will elaborate on the second factor: language learning strategies. Strategies are referred to as learning techniques, behaviors, or actions; or learning-to-learn, problem-solving, or study skills (Oxford, 1990a). For Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992), strategies are those procedures used in learning, thinking, etc., which serve as a way of reaching a goal. In language learning, usually, strategies are divided into two main groups: learning strategies and communication strategies. In this study, we will embark on the exploration of language learning strategies.

 Learning strategies refer to the ways in which a learner attempts to work out the meanings and uses of words, grammatical rules, and other aspects of a language; for example, by the use of generalization or inferencing. When discussing LLSs, Oxford (1990a) and others such as Wendon and Rubin (1987) note a desire for control and autonomy of learning on the part of the learner through LLSs. Cook (1991) insists that LLSs are choices that the learners make while learning or using the second language that effects learning. The transfer of a strategy from one language or language skill to another is a related goal of LLSs, as Pearson (1988) and Skehan (1989) have discussed.

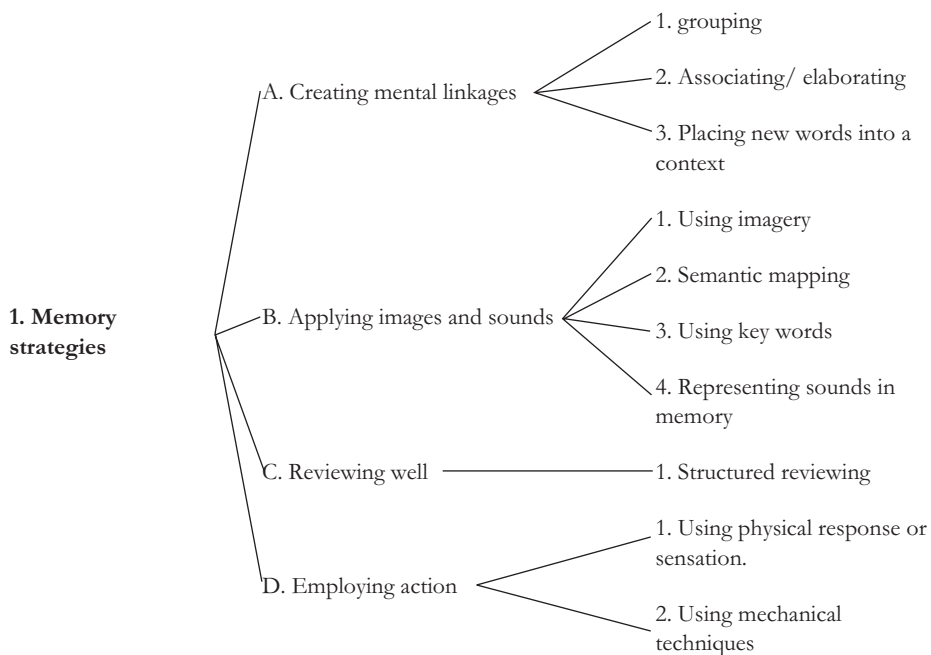Based on Oxford's (1990a) model, strategies are divided into two major classes: direct and indirect. These two classes are subdivided into a total of six groups; memory, cognitive, and compensation under the direct class; metacognitive, affective, and social under the indirect class. Language learning strategies that directly involve the target language are called direct strategies. All direct strategies require

mental processing of the language. The indirect strategies underpin the business of language learning. All these strategies are called indirect because they support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language.

The three groups of the direct class of LLSs are as follows:

Direct strategies: Memory, cognitive, and compensation

Memory strategies, such as grouping or using imagery, have a highly specific function: helping students store and retrieve new information. Cognitive strategies, such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means. Compensation strategies, like guessing or using synonyms, allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge. Figure 1 highlights three groups of direct strategies.

1. Memory strategies

A. Creating mental linkages
- 1. grouping
- 2. Associating/ elaborating
- 3. Placing new words into a context

B. Applying images and sounds
- 1. Using imagery
- 2. Semantic mapping
- 3. Using key words
- 4. Representing sounds in memory

C. Reviewing well
- 1. Structured reviewing

D. Employing action
- 1. Using physical response or sensation.
- 2. Using mechanical techniques

2. Cognitive strategies

A. Practicing
1. Repeating
2. Formally practicing with sound & writing systems
3. Recognizing and using formulas and patterns
4. Recombining
5. Practicing naturalistically

B. Receiving & sending messages
1. Getting the idea quickly
2. Using resources for receiving & sending messages

C. Analyzing and reasoning
1. Reasoning deductively
2. Analyzing expressions
3. Analyzing contrastively (across languages)
4. Translating
5. Transferring

D. Creating structure for input
1. Taking notes
2. Summarizing & output
3. Highlighting

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                              ┌──── 1. Using linguistic clues
        A. Guessing intelligently
                              └──── 2. Using other clues


                                    1. Switching to the mother
                                       tongue

                                    2. Getting help

                                    3. Using mime or gesture

3. Compensation
   strategies                       4. Avoiding communication
                                       partially or totally
        B. Overcoming limitations
          in speaking & writing     5. Selecting the topic

                                    6. Adjusting or approximating
                                       the message

                                    7. Coning a circumlocution or
                                       synonym
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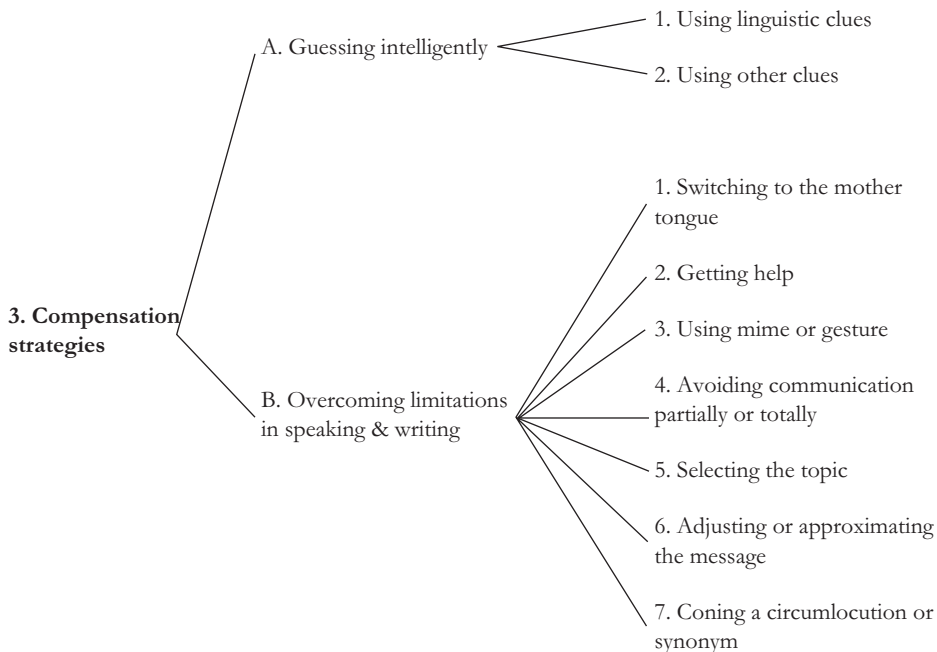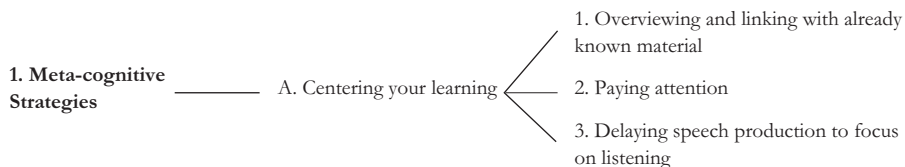
Figure 1. Oxford's direct strategies classification system (1990, p. 18)

Indirect strategies: Meta-cognitive, affective, and social

Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition, which is, to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating. Affective strategies help regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes. Finally, social strategies help students learn through interaction with others. Figure 2 illustrates the 3 indirect categories.
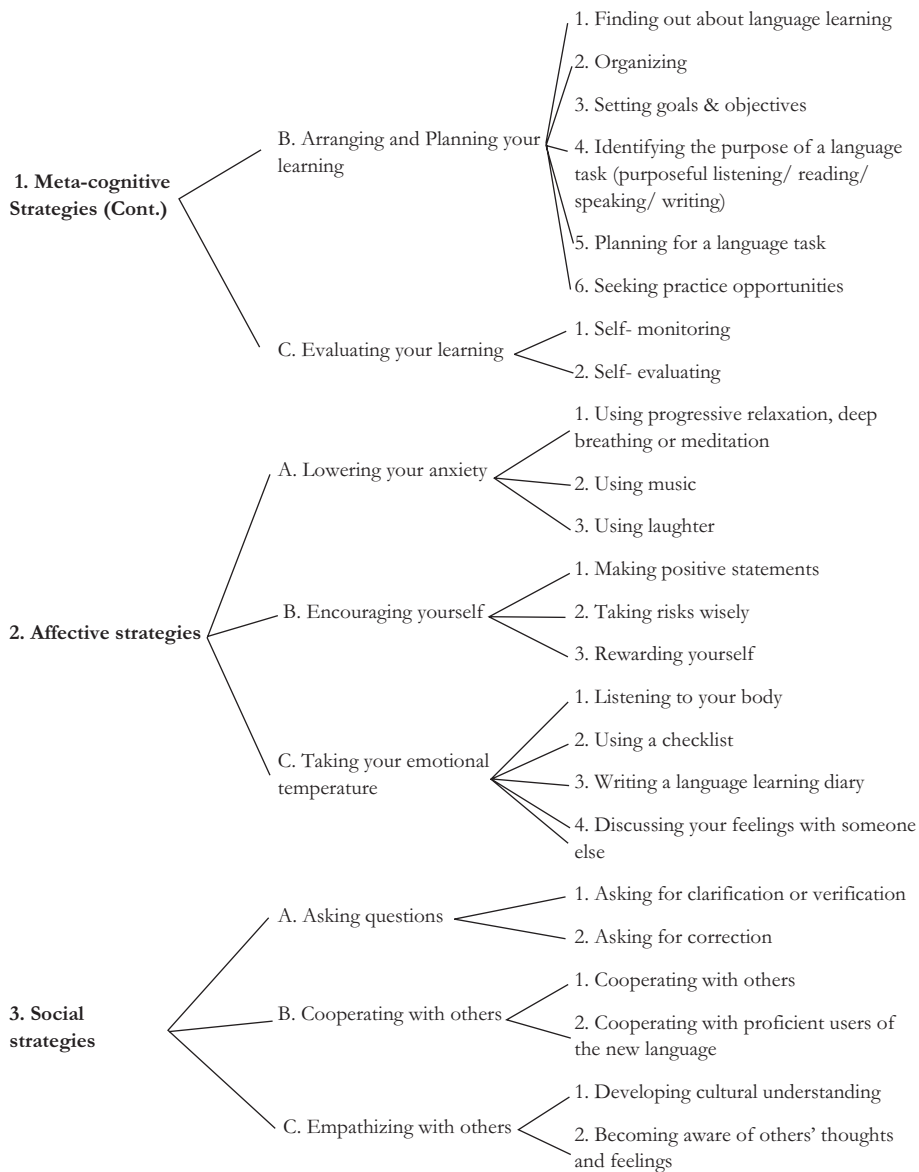
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1. Meta-cognitive                        1. Overviewing and linking with already
   Strategies  ──────  A. Centering your     known material
                          learning        2. Paying attention
                                          3. Delaying speech production to focus
                                             on listening
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1. Meta-cognitive Strategies (Cont.)

B. Arranging and Planning your learning
1. Finding out about language learning
2. Organizing
3. Setting goals & objectives
4. Identifying the purpose of a language task (purposeful listening/ reading/ speaking/ writing)
5. Planning for a language task
6. Seeking practice opportunities

C. Evaluating your learning
1. Self- monitoring
2. Self- evaluating

2. Affective strategies

A. Lowering your anxiety
1. Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing or meditation
2. Using music
3. Using laughter

B. Encouraging yourself
1. Making positive statements
2. Taking risks wisely
3. Rewarding yourself

C. Taking your emotional temperature
1. Listening to your body
2. Using a checklist
3. Writing a language learning diary
4. Discussing your feelings with someone else

3. Social strategies

A. Asking questions
1. Asking for clarification or verification
2. Asking for correction

B. Cooperating with others
1. Cooperating with others
2. Cooperating with proficient users of the new language

C. Empathizing with others
1. Developing cultural understanding
2. Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings

Figure 2: Oxford's indirect strategies classification system (1990, p.20)

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 120 EFL female students from the Iran language Institute (ILI) and Shiraz University Language Center (SULC) whose age range varies between 15-50. Sixty students were from the ILI in which teachers teach their students mainly using the audio-lingual method. But the other sixty students, who were from the SULC, were taught communicatively. The selection of the students followed a cluster random sampling procedure through which one class was chosen from intermediate classes and one from advanced classes. Based on the result of the Oxford Placement Test, those students whose scores were below the mean were not allowed to participate in the experiment as the questionnaire was in English.

Instruments

To gather data, two types of instruments were used. The first one was the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (Allan, 1985), which is a standard proficiency test. This instrument is a highly reliable and valid test to place the subjects into different language proficiency groups. An initial statistical analysis on the scores obtained from the two groups was made as shown in the following table. The means of scores of the two groups of students at intermediate level were compared through a t-test.

Group	X	SD	df	t	p<
AL	18.56	3.47	58	2.56	0.013
CA	16.13	3.88			

Table 1. T-test for comparison of proficiency scores at intermediate level

As can be observed, the resulting *p* value is smaller than p=0.05 (0.013). So, the difference between the two groups is meaningful; that is, AL students stand in a higher proficiency level than CA students. To make them comparable, however, the factor of language proficiency will be controlled by running an ANCOVA test at later stages. Also, the means of scores of the two groups of students in level twelve were compared and presented in the following table.

Group	X	SD	df	t	p<
AL	21.23	3.25	58	1.39	0.17
CA	20.00	3.62			

Table 2. T-test for comparison of proficiency scores at advanced level

Here, p value is larger than $p=0.05$ (0.17) and there is not a meaningful difference between the advanced students in the two institutes. As a result, they can be considered comparable.

The second instrument was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) which, as reported by them, is used in more than 50 institutes in different countries. This questionnaire is a 50-item test with 5 answers ranging from "never" to "always" receiving scores from 1 for the lowest frequency to 5 for the highest. The present study calculated Cronbach Alpha for each of the strategy groups, separately. The results are presented in Table 3.

Strategy types	No. Items	Cronbach alpha
Memory	9	0.62
Cognitive	14	0.56
Compensation	6	0.58
Metacognitive	9	0.69
Affective	6	0.54
Social	6	0.70

Table 3. Cronbach alpha for each of the strategies

To collect the required data for each level and each institute, the students were presented with the instruments in their classes. They were then asked to complete the OPT and the strategy questionnaire in the same session, respectively. As there was no time limit, they had enough time to complete the two instruments. They finished the two tests in an hour.

In order to compare the results of the tests between the two groups, a number of statistical analyses including t-tests, ANCOVA tests, reliability analysis, and repeated measures tests were run. The following tables show the results of the statistical analyses.

Results

For data analysis, first, the t-values were calculated to investigate the likely significant difference between the two groups. Table 4 reveals that on the whole there is a meaningful difference between the two methods.

Groups	C	t	df	p<
AL	19.90	2.57	118	0.012
CA	18.06			

Table 4. T-test for comparison of two methods regardless of level

Also, the result of another t-test shows that memory strategy is the source of difference between the two groups. This can be viewed in table 5 below.

Strategy types	AL	CA	t	df	p<
Memory	3.12	2.90	2.24	118	0.02
Cognitive	3.38	3.49	1.40	118	0.16
Compensation	3.27	3.18	0.73	118	0.46
Metacognitive	3.99	3.94	0.44	118	0.66
Affective	3.00	2.94	0.49	118	0.62
Social	3.65	3.56	0.61	118	0.54

Table 5. T-test for comparing the use of strategies in two institutes regardless of the level

As the next step, interactions of means as well as the ANCOVA tests were accomplished for each of the strategy types, separately. Here, just the results for social strategy are presented as it was the only strategy type that was manipulated differently at intermediate and advanced levels in both groups. Table 6 shows that the AL intermediate students used social strategies more than the CA students; but at the advanced level, CA students had a higher mean than AL students. Also, CA students at level 12 obtained higher means than those of level 6 in their own institute.

Level Group	6	12
AL	3.86	3.44
CA	3.43	3.69

Table 6. Interaction of means for social strategy

As can be viewed in table 7, this fact is confirmed and on the whole the difference in the interaction of group and level is statistically significant.

Source of variance	SS	df	Ms	F	Signif of F
Proficiency score	0.07	1	0.07	0.13	0.71
Main group	0.12	1	0.12	0.22	0.64
Effects level	0.32	1	0.32	0.55	0.45
Group × level	3.40	1	3.40	5.86	0.01
Residual	66.73	115	0.58		
Total	70.71	119	0.59		

Table 7. ANCOVA test for group and level with the proficiency
score control for social strategy

The interaction of means between the two groups at both levels in social strategy can be visualized better in Figure 3.
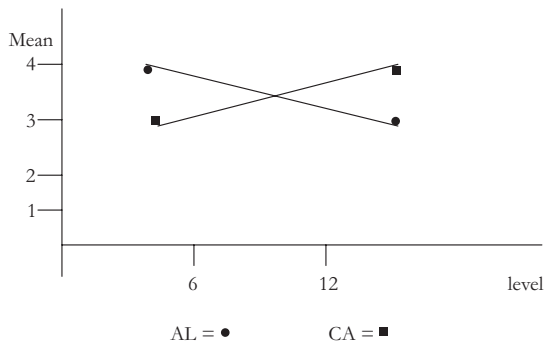
AL = ●   CA = ■
Figure 3. Interaction of means for social strategies

Furthermore, the means of the six strategy types in each of the institutes were ordered from the highest to the lowest in order to carry out a comparison both among the strategies in each group and between the two groups. This comparison was done regardless of the students' level. Table 8 presents the findings as regards AL students and Table 9 shows the results related to CA students.

Strategy type	Mean
Meta-cognitive	3.99
Social	3.65
Cognitive	3.38
Compensation	3.27
Memory	3.12
Affective	3.00

Table 8. Ordered means of the six strategy types for AL students

Strategy type	Mean
Meta-cognitive	3.94
Social	3.56
Cognitive	3.49
Compensation	3.18
Affective	2.94
Memory	2.90

Table 9. Ordered means of the six strategy types for CA students

To make sure that the significance of the differences among the means of these six strategies in the two groups does really appear as ordered as shown in the two previous tables, the repeated measures test of Pillais was used. The results can be seen in tables 10 and 11 below.

Variable	Hypoth. SS	Error SS	Hypoth. Ms	Error Ms	F	Sig. Of F
Memory	586.28	12.35	586.28	0.20	2799.24	0.00
Cognitive	686.33	10.92	686.33	0.18	3705.90	0.00
Compensation	624.44	18.49	624.44	0.31	2049.08	0.00
Meta-cognitive	956.44	18.12	956.44	0.30	3114.23	0.00
Affective	543.00	24.30	543.00	0.41	1318.32	0.00
Social	799.34	33.76	799.34	0.57	1396.92	0.00

Table 10. Repeated measures test for AL students

Variable	Hypoth. SS	Error SS	Hypoth. Ms	Error Ms	F	Sig. Of F
Memory	507.18	21.26	507.18	0.36	1407.28	0.00
Cognitive	732.50	11.67	732.50	0.19	3701.26	0.00
Compensation	606.95	37.96	606.95	0.64	943.35	0.00
Meta-cognitive	935.27	19.98	935.27	0.30	3067.85	0.00
Affective	521.16	30.97	521.16	0.52	992.80	0.00
Social	762.07	36.72	762.07	0.62	1224.22	0.00

Table 11. Repeated measures test for CA students

As was shown in tables 10 and 11, in both groups the differences among the means of all strategies are statistically significant.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, it has been found that there are some relations between teaching methods and learning strategies used by Iranian female EFL learners. These relations can be categorized this way: At the intermediate level, the use of social strategies among AL students is significantly higher than CA students.

At the advanced level this situation is the reverse, i.e. advanced CA students outperformed advanced AL students. Another finding is that both groups used the six types of strategies in the same order except for memory and affective strategies (tables 10 and 11). These inter-group variations found in this study cannot be explained unless further research incorporating more diverse teaching methods and a different gender variable is carried out. In this way, a solid and reasonable conclusion should await to see if the results of these studies will corroborate those of the present study.

Theoretical implications

There are several important theoretical assumptions which underlie contemporary ideas on language learning strategies. Excluding the Monitor and Acquisition/Learning Hypotheses, the contemporary language learning and teaching strategy theory works well with most of the contemporary language learning and teaching theories and copes well with a wide variety of different methods and approaches. For instance,

> memory and cognitive strategies are involved in the development of vocabulary and grammar knowledge on which the grammar- translation method depends. Memory and cognitive strategies can be involved to make the patterning of automatic responses characteristic of the audio-lingual method more effective. Learning more errors (developed from inter-lingual theory) involves cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. Compensation and social strategies can easily be assimilated into communicative competence theory and the communicative language teaching approach. Methods such as suggestopedia involve affective strategies. The fact that learning strategy theory can work so easily alongside other theories, methods, and approaches means that it has the potential to be a valuable component of contemporary eclectic syllabuses. (Griffiths, 2006, p. 14).

By trying to locate language learning strategies within the framework of other theories, methods, and approaches to the teaching of language to speakers of other languages, there has emerged a general movement towards eclecticism (Tarone & Yule, 1989, p. 10) "where methods are chosen to suit the students and the situation involved rather than because they conform to some rigid theory (such as the Audio-lingual insistence that students should never see words written before they have heard them spoken)". As Larsen-Freeman (1987, p. 7) put it: "It is not uncommon for teachers today to practice a principled eclecticism, combining

techniques and principles from various methods in a carefully reasoned manner. Used eclectically, in conjunction with other techniques, learning strategies may well prove to be an extremely useful addition to a language learner's tool kit."

Pedagogical implications and concluding remarks

Awareness of the findings of this study leads one to suggest that those involved in the act of language learning and language teaching (in)directly take the following points into account: EFL/ESL teachers should be aware of eclecticism which can provide language learners with opportunities to use appropriate learning strategies which each single method or a combination of them satisfies their needs. Also, it is suggested that teachers raise their own awareness of these strategies and that of their students. In the same vein, materials developers and test makers are urged to prepare teaching and testing materials in such a way that they give opportunities to the learners to benefit more from using appropriate strategies which may have been facilitated by the incorporation of the idea of eclecticism in the design of teaching and testing materials. The possible application of these recommendations by materials and test designers as well as teachers might enhance and facilitate language learning processes and performances on the part of ESL/EFL language learners resulting ultimately in an optimal learning situation and goal.

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HOW 13, 2006, ISSN 0120-5927. Bogotá, Colombia. Pages 47-63

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