

Cross Context Role of Language Proficiency in Learners' use of Language Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Responding to the controversies in the results of past studies regarding the impact of language proficiency on learners' use of language learning strategies, this article reports the effect of language proficiency on the strategy use of Iranian English learners across two different settings, namely ESL Malaysia, and EFL Iran. Some 157 Iranian college level male English learners were randomly selected from both settings as establishing the ESL and EFL groups of the study. They were further grouped into their appropriate levels of language proficiency based on their language institutes' placement tests, and their self-assessed proficiency report. Version seven of Oxford's SILL was adopted to collect information on the learners' perceived use of language learning strategies regarding the overall SILL and the six strategy categories included in SILL. Statistical techniques, namely ANOVA and MANOVA, were separately utilized for analyzing the data collected for ESL and EFL groups. To gain rich data, the researchers conducted a semi-structured one-on-one interview with 12 students (six from each setting) to elicit information on the participants' incentives for learning and using the target language in their related settings (Iran and Malaysia). The results of the study show that language proficiency significantly affected the ESL learners in using both the overall SILL and the six strategy categories included in SILL. In contrast, EFL learners across low, intermediate and advanced groups of proficiency did not significantly differ from each other with respect to overall use of the SILL and its six strategy categories.

Keywords: *Language Proficiency, EFL Setting, ESL Setting, Language Learning Strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Proficiency and Language Learning Strategies

The relationship between proficiency and language learning strategies can be seen in many studies. Past studies conducted in this area have generally verified the relationship between language learning strategies and students' proficiency level; more proficient language learners use a greater variety and a greater number of learning strategies. Rost and Ross (1991) pointed out that students with different levels of language proficiency differed in their use of certain strategies, more specifically; the more proficient students differed from the less proficient students in their cognitive level. Phillips (1991) used SILL and TOEFL scores to investigate the relationship between adult ESL students' language learning strategies and proficiency. Phillips reported strong relationships between ESL/EFL strategy use frequency in language learning and English proficiency levels. Oxford and Ehrman (1995) studied 520 highly educated and motivated adult students in the US, aiming to explore the importance of learning strategy use in the success of adult foreign language students. They reported a low but significant correlation between cognitive

strategy use and speaking proficiency.

In Green and Oxford's (1995) study on Puerto Rican students, they suggested a causal ascending spiral relationship between proficiency levels and language learning strategies. They reported that the more successful students used language learning strategies more frequently than less successful students. In Park's (1997) study, Oxford's (1990a) SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) was used to measure language learning strategies, while the TOEFL score was used as the indicator of the Korean students' proficiency. Park also reported a linear relationship between language learning strategies and L2 proficiency. All the six categories of language learning strategies in SILL were significantly correlated with the TOEFL scores, with cognitive and social strategies as the most predictive of these Korean university students' TOEFL scores. In his study of language learning strategies and proficiency factor, Bremner (1999) involved 149 students who were primary lecturers. The results of the study reported significant relationships between proficiency factor and strategy use, especially compensation strategies, social strategies and mostly cognitive strategies. Bremner pointed out that the link between proficiency and strategy use might be that strategies are simply features of proficiency, which means that only by reaching a certain level will a student be likely to use a given strategy. Another related study by Rahimi (2004) attempted to investigate the factors influencing LLS use of post secondary level Persian EFL learners. The results of his study pointed to proficiency and motivation as major predictors of LLS use of the participants. Similarly, Khalil (2005) also concluded that proficiency has a main effect on the overall strategy use of his Palestinian EFL participants while the effect on each of the six strategy categories is variable. Another pertinent study was conducted by Yang (2007) whose results indicated that there are significant differences between low, intermediate and advanced proficiency groups of Taiwanese EFL learners in using cognitive, compensation and social categories of strategies as well as in using the overall SILL. Finally a study by Yang (2010) on 288 Korean university students proved that language proficiency levels had significant effects on the learners' use of the overall SILL, the six categories of strategy included in SILL, and the individual strategy items listed in SILL.

In this study, using Oxford's (1990a) SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning), the author will intervene language proficiency as an independent variable to determine its effect on the language learning strategy use of Iranian students across two settings; namely ESL setting (Malaysia) and EFL setting (Iran). In particular, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. Does language proficiency factor affect the use of the overall language learning strategies of Iranian language learners in (a) the EFL group, and (b) the ESL group in this study?
2. Does language proficiency affect the use of any of the six categories of language learning strategies in (1) the EFL group and (2) the ESL group in this study?

Background to the Problem

Many studies carried out on the role of proficiency point to its positive effect on the learner's strategy use (Khalil, 2005; Oxford, 1996; Park, 1997; Phillips, 1991; Rahimi, 2004; Rost & Ross, 1991; Takeuchi, 1993; Yang, 2007, 2010) to name some. Many of these studies were carried out in EFL contexts using Oxford's SILL. By contrast, several other studies have reported very low correlation between proficiency and SILL strategies (Mullin, 1992; Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985) to name a few. The reason some studies yielded strong relationship between proficiency and strategy while others did not has not been fully uncovered. Takeuchi, Griffiths, and Coyle (2007) enumerate some possible reasons for this contradiction. Firstly, they refer to Scarcella and Oxford (1992) as arguing that it is possible that other variables may overshadow strategy use, such as self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, field dependence/independence, and motivation. Second, they argue that contradictory results may relate to the type of instrument selected to measure proficiency. For instance, according to Nisbet et al. (2005) it is likely that learner strategies correlate more strongly with more communicative measures of proficiency which are different from TOEFL which is designed to assess mainly cognitive/academic language proficiency. Thirdly, as Nisbet et al. (2005) argued, learners might have used strategies other than those reported on the SILL. Finally, one explanation is that what determines learning

outcomes is not the frequency of strategy application, but the flexibility in using strategies in a specific context (Takeuchi et al., 2007).

In alignment with this last explanation, the authors in the present study believe any explanation for the relationship between proficiency and strategy use should have in its centrality the interplay between cognitive stance of the learner and social or socio-geographical settings where learning takes place. More specifically, in this study proficiency as a variable that might influence the learner's choice of strategy will be investigated in two different contexts, namely, ESL Malaysia and EFL Iran. Thus, the findings of the present study might shed some light on the contradiction in the results of past studies regarding the relationship between proficiency and language learning strategies. The term EFL is used to refer to contexts where English is neither widely used for communication, nor used as the medium of instruction (Carter & Nunan, 2001) as is the case in Iran. ESL refers to "The teaching and learning of English in communities where it is widely used for communication by the population at large" (Nunan, 1999) as is the case in Malaysia.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 157 Iranian male college level English learners who were randomly selected based on a two-step cluster sampling procedure partly from the Iranian Kish Language Centers located in Tehran (EFL setting), the capital city of Iran, and partly from the Malaysian British Council Language Centre (ESL setting) in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. Some 61 students established our ESL group while 96 learners constituted the EFL group. All participants were placed in their appropriate levels of language proficiency (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) based on their institutes' placement tests as well as by their end of course achievement tests. To ensure the appropriateness of their proficiency levels the students' self-assessed proficiency reports were also utilized. All participants were studying English at their private language centers to improve their four language skills for both communicative and academic purposes. Their age range was from 22 to 30 years.

For the interview part 12 students (6 from each setting) who had filled out the SILL volunteered to participate in the interview. The EFL interviewees were six Iranian adult male learners who had never left their country to live overseas for a long time, while the ESL interviewees were six Iranian adult male students who had the experience of living and learning English in both Iran and Malaysia with having enough exposure to different variations of English language. In each group, there were two elementary, two intermediate and two advanced learners of English with the age range of 22 to 30.

Instruments

Personal Background Information Questionnaire (PBIQ)

The PBIQ used in this study was a modified version of Oxford's (1990a) Background Questionnaire. This questionnaire collected brief information on participants' individual background, namely: their age, gender, job, length of studying English, months or years of studying English in their current language institute, and self-rated English proficiency level. One extra question was added to the PBIQ of the ESL participants' questionnaire which required their length of residence in ESL Malaysia to ensure enough exposure to a different variation of English. The criterion for their length of residence in ESL Malaysia was set at a minimum of six months. For confidentiality, the participants had a choice to leave or not leave their names, but they were assured that their personal information would be confidential and used in this study only. The PBIQ also included a question to collect information about their language level proficiency as a means of assigning participants' self-rated proficiency level as it was practically impossible to put all the participants in their appropriate levels of low, intermediate and high language proficiency based on rigid proficiency tests such as TOEFL.

Oxford's (1990a) Strategy Inventory (SILL)

Oxford's (1990a) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL (version seven) is a 50-item survey, proven to be reliable, to discover the frequency of language learner strategies used by second or foreign language learners in learning English. A rating scale from 1 to 5 is used as the indication of the Likert scale with number one representing "never or almost never true of me", and number 5 standing for "always or almost always true of me". The SILL's alpha coefficient for reliability is .92 (Griffiths, 2007) and content validity is .99 (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). This inventory consists of six major categories each containing a number of items. The categories include: 1) Memory (nine items: 1-9); 2) Cognitive (14 items: 10-23); 3) Compensation (six items: 24-29); 4) Metacognitive (nine items: 30-38); 5) Affective (six items: 39-44); and 6) Social (six items: 45-50). The SILL is used to conduct surveys for summarizing results for a group by means of statistical treatment and objectively diagnosing the problem of individual students (Oxford, 1990a). The overall average indicates how often learners tend to use the language learning strategy. For example, if the learners score 2.5 on average for a memory strategy, then this score indicates that the learners, on average, use the strategy about half the time. To collect data on the participants' language learning strategies in this study, Oxford's (1990a) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) along with the author's equivalent Persian translation of the SILL was used. To further ensure the reliability of the inventory, it was administered to 33 subjects randomly selected from those who had participated in the study, with a time interval of two weeks. The test-retest reliability index turned out to be .81. Students' performance on the questionnaires were scored and analyzed for exploring the pattern of strategy use among this group of English learners.

Semi-structured Interview

To gain rich data, we conducted a semi-structured one-on-one interview with 12 students (six from each setting) after collecting the quantitative questionnaire. The interview was to elicit information on students' incentives for learning and using the target language among low, intermediate and advanced proficiency groups in their related settings (Iran and Malaysia). The main interview questions were, "What motivates you to learn or use English in this country?" and "How do you use English outside the classroom in this country?" The qualitative data collected and analyzed were triangulated with the quantitative data to help shed light on the cross-context role of language proficiency on learners' language learning strategy use. Each interviewee's response sheet was given a code which substituted their real names in order to maintain confidentiality. The interviews were conducted in both Persian (participants' first language) and English in order to let them freely exhibit their thoughts and attitudes. In other words, the respondents were free to choose either language or shift from one to the other.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

Because the questionnaire items were all closed questions and all the responses were presented on a Likert-scale, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized to analyze this quantitative data. The participants responded to all the strategy items on a Likert-scale from 1 to 5, which ranked their frequencies of language learning strategy use. The mean scores of each of the six categories of strategies were calculated in order to find out the frequencies of individual categories of strategies that the participants reportedly perceived to use. The mean scores of all strategy categories were calculated to find out the overall use of the participants' language learning strategies. One-way ANOVA was utilized to see if significant differences existed between the low, intermediate, and advanced participants in each group (EFL/ESL) in terms of overall using of the SILL. To find out if the differences between elementary, intermediate and advanced students in each setting group (EFL/ESL) were significant with respect to their perceived use of the six strategy categories in the SILL, multivariate analysis of variances (MANOVA) was best suited the study.

Qualitative Data Analysis

EFL interviewees were designated Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4, Student 5, and Student 6 while the ESL interviewees who were living and learning English in Malaysia were designated as Student A, Student B, Student C, Student D, Student E, and Student F. In each group, there were two elementary (Students 1 and 2, as well as students A and B), two intermediate (Students 3 and 4, as well as students C and D) and two advanced (Students 5 and 6, as well as students E and F) learners of English. The data from the interview were analyzed manually. The data collected and analyzed would help shed light on the differences of language learning among Iranian language learners due to language proficiency differences across the two different contexts of the study (ESL/EFL contexts). In fact, to achieve rich results the interview data were triangulated with the data gained through the SILL questionnaire.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

In broad terms, while language proficiency factor seems to affect the ESL learners’ both overall use of the SILL and the application of six categories included in SILL, it does not significantly differentiate between low, intermediate and advanced EFL learners with respect to overall use of SILL and its six strategy categories.

Beginning with the first research question of the study, “does the language proficiency factor significantly affect the use of the overall language learning strategies of Iranian language learners in (a) the EFL group, and (b) the ESL group in this study?”, one-way ANOVA was separately applied for our EFL and ESL groups. The results of one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 93) = 1.84, p = .164 > .05, \omega^2 = .01$) for the EFL group (Table 1) indicate that, statistically, there are no significant differences between the mean scores of the advanced, intermediate and elementary EFL students in using overall SILL. Thus the null hypothesis “there is no significant difference between low, intermediate and advanced EFL learners with respect to their mean score in overall use of the SILL” could not be rejected.

Table 1 One-Way ANOVA Overall SILL by Proficiency Groups (EFL Setting)

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.655	2	.328	1.846	.164
Within Groups	16.497	93	.177		
Total	17.152	95			

On the contrary, the results of one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 58) = 8.03, p = .001 < .05$) for the ESL group (Table 2) indicate that significant differences exist between the mean scores of the advanced, intermediate and elementary students in using the overall SILL. The effect size ($\omega^2 = .18$) proves to be large statistically. Thus, the null hypothesis “there is no significant difference between low, intermediate and advanced ESL learners with respect to their mean score in overall use of the SILL” is rejected.

Table 2 One-Way ANOVA Overall Use of the SILL by Proficiency Groups (ESL)

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.604	2	2.302	8.038	.001
Within Groups	16.609	58	.286		
Total	21.212	60			

To deal with the second research question which reads as: ‘Does language proficiency significantly affect the use of any of the six categories of language learning strategies in (1) the EFL group and (2) the ESL

group in this study?' multivariate analysis of variances (MANOVA) was separately used for the EFL and ESL groups in the study.

First, descriptive statistics (Table 3) containing the EFL participants' mean scores on the SILL's six categories across proficiency groups is presented as follows:

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Categories of Learning Strategies by Proficiency Groups (EFL Setting)

Dependent Variable	PROFICIENCY	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
MEMORY	ELEMENTARY	2.700	.110	2.481	2.919
	INTERMEDIATE	2.713	.108	2.498	2.928
	ADVANCED	2.908	.102	2.705	3.110
COGNITIVE	ELEMENTARY	3.036	.098	2.842	3.229
	INTERMEDIATE	3.154	.096	2.964	3.345
	ADVANCED	3.324	.090	3.145	3.504
COMPENSATION	ELEMENTARY	3.222	.110	3.003	3.441
	INTERMEDIATE	3.430	.109	3.215	3.646
	ADVANCED	3.381	.102	3.178	3.584
METACOGNITIVE	ELEMENTARY	3.578	.122	3.335	3.821
	INTERMEDIATE	3.627	.120	3.388	3.866
	ADVANCED	3.851	.113	3.626	4.076
AFFECTIVE	ELEMENTARY	2.644	.105	2.437	2.852
	INTERMEDIATE	2.559	.103	2.355	2.763
	ADVANCED	2.738	.097	2.546	2.930
SOCIAL	ELEMENTARY	3.744	.123	3.501	3.988
	INTERMEDIATE	3.806	.121	3.567	4.046
	ADVANCED	3.733	.114	3.508	3.959

As mentioned earlier, a multivariate analysis of variances test (MANOVA), (table 4) was run to determine if there were significant differences between the advanced, intermediate and elementary EFL students' mean scores in using the categories of the learning strategies in the SILL.

Table 4 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (MANOVA) Categories of Learning Strategies by Proficiency Groups (EFL Setting)

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
PROFICIENCY	MEMORY	.903	2	.451	1.241	.294	.026
	COGNITIVE	1.376	2	.688	2.410	.095	.049
	COMPENSATION	.722	2	.361	.987	.376	.021
	METACOGNITIVE	1.404	2	.702	1.560	.216	.032
	AFFECTIVE	.528	2	.264	.806	.450	.017
	SOCIAL	.099	2	.050	.110	.896	.002

Based on the results displayed in Table 3 it can be concluded that in the EFL group the advanced students show higher mean scores than the intermediate and the elementary groups on all the six categories of strategies in the SILL. However, multivariate analysis of their variances (Table4) indicates that the proficiency factor does not show a statistically significant effect on any of these strategy categories ($p > .05$), i.e. the null hypothesis "there is no significant difference between the proficiency groups in terms of using the six categories of the SILL" could not be rejected for the EFL group. Similarly, Table 3 shows that intermediate learners indicated higher mean scores on almost (except for the affective domain) all the strategy categories than elementary students, but multivariate analysis of their variances (MANOVA)

indicated that there is no statistically significant difference ($p > .05$) between the intermediate and elementary levels in the EFL group with respect to using the six strategy categories in the SILL.

In order to compare ESL learners' mean scores across elementary, intermediate and high groups of proficiency, their descriptive information (Table 5) is presented followed by inferential statistics (Table 6, MANOVA) in trying to determine if there are significant differences between the groups' mean scores with respect to using SILL six strategy categories as follows:

Table 5 Descriptive Statistics Categories of Learning Strategies by Proficiency Groups (ESL Setting)

Dependent Variable	Proficiency	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
MEMORY	ELEMENTARY	2.801	.160	2.482	3.121
	INTERMEDIATE	3.106	.142	2.822	3.391
	ADVANCED	3.333	.164	3.005	3.662
COGNITIVE	ELEMENTARY	2.944	.141	2.661	3.226
	INTERMEDIATE	3.494	.126	3.242	3.746
	ADVANCED	3.722	.145	3.432	4.013
COMPENSATION	ELEMENTARY	2.825	.151	2.522	3.127
	INTERMEDIATE	3.667	.134	3.398	3.936
	ADVANCED	4.120	.155	3.810	4.431
METACOGNITIVE	ELEMENTARY	3.585	.157	3.271	3.899
	INTERMEDIATE	4.005	.140	3.725	4.284
	ADVANCED	4.259	.161	3.936	4.582
AFFECTIVE	ELEMENTARY	2.719	.146	2.426	3.012
	INTERMEDIATE	2.882	.130	2.621	3.142
	ADVANCED	3.185	.150	2.884	3.486
SOCIAL	ELEMENTARY	3.658	.169	3.319	3.997
	INTERMEDIATE	4.035	.151	3.733	4.336
	ADVANCED	4.028	.174	3.680	4.376

The results displayed in Table 5 reports that on average ESL learners at higher proficiency groups gained higher mean scores in almost all the strategy categories in the SILL. Accordingly, the authors applied a multivariate analysis of variances test (MANOVA, Table 6) to see where the differences lie across the proficiency layers and whether they are significant, as follows:

Table 6 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (MANOVA) Categories of Learning Strategies by Proficiency Groups (ESL Setting)

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
PROFICIENCY	MEMORY	2.649	2	1.325	2.736	.073	.086
	COGNITIVE	6.033	2	3.016	7.958	.001*	.215
	COMPENSATION	16.173	2	8.087	18.666	.000*	.392
	METACOGNITIVE	4.327	2	2.164	4.623	.014*	.137
	AFFECTIVE	2.066	2	1.033	2.541	.088	.081
	SOCIAL	1.829	2	.914	1.679	.196	.055

With regard to SILL six categories, the results of MANOVA (Table 6) revealed that the proficiency factor had a statistically significant effect ($p < .05$) on the ESL learners' performance in using cognitive, compensation and metacognitive categories of strategies. By contrast, MANOVA (Table 6) did not show

significant differences between low, intermediate and advanced ESL learners in using memory, affective and social strategy categories.

Qualitative Results

The general consensus among EFL respondents is that there are not many situations for English use outside language classes in Iran as English is neither the national language of the country nor is it used as a medium of communication in Iranian public or private organizations. As Students 3 and 5 mentioned, due to sociopolitical conditions existing in Iran, the country has not played host to international visitors at large for a long time; therefore they have had very few chances to use oral English outside the class. All the six EFL interviewees referred to almost the same activities they used to do outside the class as manifestation of English use such as doing homework assignments, exchanging emails in English, online chatting, and watching English movies or series, without noticeable differences related to their proficiency levels. The strong incentive for this group of learners to learn English is that they might immigrate to an English speaking country where using the target language would be vital. Furthermore, they pointed to job opportunities they would have if they learned English in Iran. While Student 1 pointed to his job as an opportunity that involved him in exchanging emails in English, Student 2 referred to note taking in the forms of flash or reading cards as a way of learning new English words and their dictation. What distinguished elementary interviewees from the other respondents in the group was their interest in listening to English songs and memorizing them; besides that, they were more interested in doing their homework. For example Student 1 expressed his interest as *"Before I do my homework assignments, I try to play my favorite music and sing along with it. I prefer to listen to those songs that their texts could be found on the Internet."* Intermediate and advanced members of the EFL group similarly pointed to watching English movies as their main source of knowing about the culture of English speaking countries. They also pointed to English short stories and some noted reading journals such as 'Reader's Digest' as well as Internet texts as their main sources for learning and using English. Reportedly, for these EFL learners receptive skills especially reading are the main channels for language improvement, whereas productive skills play minor roles in improving their English mastery. In support of this claim Student 4 mentioned that:

Unfortunately, in Iran unlike many other countries, there is not much of a chance to orally use English outside English classes; as a result, I try to compensate for this lack by creating an atmosphere so that I can be exposed to English materials. For instance I watch one or two episodes of 'FRIENDS' every night and put down its phrases on a piece of paper and review them the following days. But when you cannot use these phrases in your daily conversations, they will be removed out of your memory after a while.

Student 6 thought of his writing practices as bringing him opportunities to use and learn English for part of his graduation requirements contained publishing a few journal articles. He voiced that:

During my previous semesters it was not very important for me to work on my writing skill; rather I mainly used my English knowledge to read English texts on the Internet as related to my academic major or as for fun . . . however it came time for me to use my English for writing articles and at the beginning it was really demanding to produce well structured writing texts. Then I tried to seek assistance from my English teachers who normally work on writing skill less than other skills in language classes.

The responses obtained from EFL interviewees indicate that apart from extreme cases of oral use of English outside language classes in working or academic settings, EFL learners mostly use English for reading. They also use the target language for writing in the form of emails, journal articles, or academic tasks. They can work on their listening by watching movies or English programs. Nevertheless, they rarely use English for oral communication in the community. The responses also indicate that Iranian EFL learners were unable to establish strong target language communities in Iran where English is not used beyond the classroom walls.

On the other hand, the strong view among the ESL interviewees is that English is the medium of communication for them and they frequently put their English knowledge into practice to meet their daily needs. Included in their areas of English use or incentives to learn and use the target language were interacting with both Malaysian and international friends, watching English TV programs and movies,

shopping, exchanging emails, taxi renting, doing academic tasks, going out with friends, and using the Internet for different purposes including doing academic searches. Nonetheless, differences in using English or the incentives for learning and using English among these ESL interviewees could be observed due to their occupation and level of proficiency. Elementary learners mainly referred to using English as a means of communication and doing their academic tasks while advanced learners reportedly not only put their English knowledge into practice for handling their academic tasks, but they also used English to establish stronger relationship within the local community of Malaysians with whom they worked or lived, as well as within the community of college academia and their language classroom community. For instance Student F regards his working conditions as bringing him opportunities to immensely use English. He notes that:

Here you need to use English almost in every aspect of your life, including doing your daily routine, opening a bank account, renting a taxi, checking emails, greeting with friends, and many more. Additionally, if your job contains using English, which in most cases it does, you need to improve your English inevitably.

Student E who was currently studying IT and at the same time was working in a local company as an IT expert claims:

In the company where I work I am noticeable for my English oral proficiency and the more I gain mastery in English the more I get promoted and respected by my local employers. In language classes, too, I can joyfully catch the attention of other international friends when I speak fluently and beautifully.

Some of our ESL participants were anxious about possible ways they could find to work on the oral aspect of their language and on the structures of their language as well. This is, for instance, quite reflected in the voice of Student D, who is a master student and a part-time worker, when he uttered that:

For me, it has turned to a joyful habit to review all I have done during the day, especially when I am lying in my bed, preparing to sleep at night. This way I can think of the utterances I have learned from others during that day and more important than that is that I think of the mistakes I have made in my talk with friends, teachers, and co-workers and I try to correct them and not repeat them. Also, I am very outgoing and I like to meet different people especially those who can speak English better than me. Sometimes learning English outside the English class is more joyful than learning it in the class.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study both contradict and support the results gained by similar studies in the field. The present study shows that while proficiency affected the ESL learners both in overall use of SILL and in applying SILL six strategy categories, it did not seem to influence the EFL learners' overall strategy use nor did it have a significant impact on their application of the SILL six strategy categories. Although some researchers (Khalil, 2005; Oxford, 1996; Park, 1997; Phillips, 1991; Rahimi, 2004; Rost & Ross, 1991; Takeuchi, 1993; Yang, 2007, 2010) point to the positive effect of proficiency factor on the learner's strategy use, other studies carried out in the EFL contexts report very low correlation between proficiency and SILL strategies (e.g., Mullins, 1992; Nisbet et al., 2005; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985).

The reason some studies yielded strong relationship between learners' proficiency level and their strategy use while others did not has not been fully uncovered. The authors of the present study believe any explanation for the relationship between proficiency and strategy use should have in its centrality the interplay between cognitive stance of the learner and social settings where learning takes place. In other words, learner cognitive behavior is constituted within the social settings where learning takes place. Thus, we might be able to come to grips with this relationship in light of 'communities of practice' and 'situated second language learning'. The concept of community of practice was proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) to explain processes of interaction and development among changeable and dynamic groups and social settings. Community of practice is defined as an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor; ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, power relations, values and practices in sum, emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor (Eckert & McConnel-Ginet, 1992). In the same line, for instance, Paris, Byrnes, and Paris (2001) explain their viewpoints on strategies in situated

condition and communities of practice. They hold the view that in the sociocultural perspective the individual is not all-powerful; the social environment might restrict or facilitate individual efforts to learn the strategies of the old-timers.

As far as the results of the present study reveal, EFL learners in higher proficiency groups were not as eager as their high proficient ESL counterparts to establish strong second language communities (communities of practice) in their educational settings in EFL Iran where the target language is not communicated by the members of Iranian society specially in spoken forms outside language classes. In such a society we do not observe learner's growing participation in communities of practice, be it the language class in a micro view or the whole Iranian EFL society in a macro view. This relates to the very fact that despite the emerging patterns of interaction with the world in the form of cultural and trade exchanges in many ESL/EFL contexts, the social fabric of Iranian society is still quite traditional to a great extent where people mostly identify themselves in terms of family and religious values and very less likely in terms of English. Thus, the EFL learners do not vastly grow a strategy repertoire or do not significantly change in their strategy pattern as they move up to higher levels of proficiency. In fact, language class as the main community of practice in Iran is the main source for an EFL learner to practically use the target language. We do not observe variant forms of communities of practice in such societies.

By contrast in ESL Malaysia the interplay between communicative use of English out of the classroom situations and the dynamics of the classroom situation may lead to a more cosmopolitan attitude or international outlook in the aspects of Iranian students' identities. In such a society, Iranian learners' identities are both constituted by and constitutive of their community of practice, be it their language classroom community or the community of college academia in which they learn English or study their lessons. The notion is more illuminated when we refer to the responses ESL interviewees gave when asked about their incentive for learning the target language.

ESL interviewees of higher proficiency were more willing to develop a more powerful place in their language classroom community, community of college academia or the community of international students in Malaysia. The reason given was to access the knowledge resources required for fulfilling their aims, such as writing journal articles, communicating with the academia, finding a job, graduation and in sum using English in a variety of situations in or outside the classroom. Among the responses was the wish to gain attention of other members of their classroom community. More proficient ESL learners more significantly used cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies than less proficient ESL learners. By contrast, the proficiency groups in the EFL sample did not significantly differ from one another regarding the use of any of the strategy categories in the SILL. Taking a view which has in its centrality sociocultural orientations but without denying psycholinguistic influences, it could be concluded that Iranian ESL learners' growing participation in the activities of their communities of practice (language class, college academia, community of international or local friends and in sum the community of target language users) enabled them to increasingly apply strategies to efficiently understand and manipulate the target language (cognitive strategies), to consciously look for ways to become good language learners (metacognitive behavior) and to control their fear or anxiety of learning or using the target language in a variety of situations (affective strategies) in ESL Malaysia as they gained more and more mastery in the target language. In fact, we can argue that the contradiction in the results of past studies as well as the present study with respect to the effect of proficiency on the learners' strategy use might imply that either the participants in these studies have used strategies other than those listed in the SILL or strategies are not merely features of proficiency per se; rather the interaction of proficiency with other variables such as sociocultural settings play a significant role in learners' strategy use as was the case with the participants in this study.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATION

The results of the study showed that language proficiency significantly affected the ESL learners in using both the overall SILL and the six strategy categories included in SILL. In contrast, EFL learners across low, intermediate and advanced groups of proficiency did not significantly differ from each other with respect to overall use of the SILL and its six strategy categories. The results of the interview data analysis

were in alignment with the results gained by the quantitative data analysis; high proficient English learners in the ESL group were more willing to develop a more powerful place in their language classroom community, community of college academia or the community of target language users in Malaysia compared to low proficient ESL learners. In the EFL group, nevertheless, students did not significantly show differences in their strategy use across different groups of low, intermediate and advanced proficiency. Linking back to the controversies mentioned earlier by the authors regarding the relationship between learners' strategy use and their proficiency level, the study results imply that strategies or their frequency of usage are not always features of language proficiency; rather, the interaction of proficiency with other variables such as sociocultural setting might affect learners' strategy use pattern.

Revolving around the issue of proficiency and its impact on learners' LLS use, what might persuade other authors in the field is the need to benefit from both psychological and sociocultural perspectives in the field with a focus on cross context impact of proficiency on learners' LLS use. One might righteously argue that, what are called strategies or mental processes or even cognitive and metacognitive strategies in psychological (cognitive) perspective could be called actions, strategies, or practices within the framework of sociocultural activity theory or the "community of practices" model. In the same line, in the present study, the authors have regarded the language classroom as a sociocultural setting from a micro view and EFL/ESL settings as other types of settings which are socioculturally and sociopolitically grounded at a macro level, each with unique and variant features where learners' actions (strategies) occur and are affected by their dynamic identities. These actions or strategies can change due to the learners' proficiency level, length of residence in a setting, their amount of exposure to English in the society at large and their access to the power relations in communities in which they live or learn English. This might explain why Iranian ESL learners in Malaysia reported using more strategies at higher levels of language proficiency and were more actively involved in learning and using the target language compared to their EFL counterparts who were not observed as significantly change in their strategy use pattern as they move up to higher levels of proficiency. We might not be able to discuss such controversies without resorting to both psychological (cognitive) and sociocultural views of second language acquisition. Therefore the researchers in the field are recommended to investigate the effect of proficiency on the strategy choice of the learner across different contexts such as EFL/ESL ones with a focus to combine and reconcile cognitive or psychological perspectives of learning strategies with sociocultural views of second language acquisition in their theoretical frameworks as well as in interpreting their study results.

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