

Distance Context and Language Learning Strategies: A Study of Moodle-Based Context among EFL Learners in Iran

Abdullah Sarani
Behzad Ghonsooly
Rasoul Najjar*

Abstract

Distance language learning has attracted the interests of Second/ Foreign language teachers over the world as a result of new developments in Information and Communication Technology. Although self-regulation, autonomy, independency of the learners, and strategy development play a central role in distance language learning (white 2003), some distance contexts used for teaching purposes do not consider the above learner-based principles. This study explores distance language learner strategies among 60 participants studying English for Academic Purposes within Moodle distance context. Two questionnaires were given to the participants to find out which strategy they used and at what level. The questionnaires (background questionnaire and SILL questionnaire Version 7.0) proposed by Oxford (1990) explored 50 strategies. The results showed that although distance language learners have their own specific patterns of strategy, they are low level strategy users at a moodle-based distance language learning context. Furthermore, we found no statistical significant differences between males and females using strategies within the distance context.

Key words: Distance Language Learning, English for Academic Purposes, Language Learning Strategies, Moodle-Based Distance Context.

* Department of English Language and literature, University of Sistan and Baluchestan Zahedan, Iran..

Introduction

Research on Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) has a prolonged historical research in applied linguistics. Language learning investigators have tried to discover LLSs used by “Good language learners” and prescribed them to other language learners (Macaro, 2005). In general, the past studies show there have been two lines of researches in the area of LLSs. One explores new LLSs and another explores effective and influential factors impacting LLSs. The first line concluded in proposing various taxonomies such as Oxford (1990), O’Malley and Chamot (1990), and Cohen (2006). These taxonomies are then used in second line of research to examine factors influencing LLSs such as age, gender, experiences, awareness, beliefs, and effects of culture and context as sociocultural variables (Chamot; 2004).

Learning environments (contexts) may have a key role on students’ ways of learning. In other words, new contexts such as distance contexts may require new choices or strategies of learning. DLL context has developed as a result of integrating new technologies with language learning (White, 2003). As DLL results in achievements, (Bertin et al., 2010) it has attracted the interests of Second/ Foreign language teachers all over the world and turned to a new context in language learning and teaching as well as in applied linguistics research.

Exploring Distance language learning strategies (DLLSs) faces some complexities. On the one hand, the nature of opportunities for DLL is diverse and still evolving. DLL programs include a wide range of elements, practices, and opportunities from traditional print-based correspondence courses to courses delivered entirely online (White, 2003). Using these extensive opportunities, teachers and learners reflect various strategies. On the other hand, many of current DLL programs have paid little attention to strategy-based instructions. The encouragement for using Web-based teaching has sometimes been imposed by administrations in the hope that the use of technology would enable institutions to retain their competitive state with other institutions for the purpose of recruiting students or in the belief that the use of technology would somehow reduce educational costs. In some cases, the result has been the creation of hastily-

developed web pages that offer relatively little added value to second language teaching. Few pedagogical principles were available to guide the design of these pages compared with those governing technical requirements for Web page creation.

The current study tries to concern the strategic competence at DLL context in the hop that propose some pedagogical principals for designing DLL programs. This competence can be improved through computer-based education. Computer technologies are very flexible and almost all opportunities can be created through this flexibility. Therefore, the first step in designing distance program is to be aware of the learners' needs, choices of learning (strategies), and their beliefs to the DLL which is a responsibility for language teachers rather than IT professionals. IT professionals, computer programming engineers, and web designers can adopt language learner strategies and adapt their distance programs with these strategies.

Review of Literature

Conceptual Framework of the Study

As distance language interaction like face-to-face interaction leads to language learning (White, 2003; Holmberg *et al.*, 2005; Hansson & Wenno, 2005; Murphy, 2008; White, 2007; Hurd & Lewis, 2008; Gascoigne, 2008), the lack of direct interaction have to be replaced with something else at distance contexts. This lack of interaction, theoretically, was filled up with autonomy and independency (Oxford, 2003; White, 1995; 2003; Hurd & Beaven & Ortega, 2001). Examining autonomy and strategy use in distance foreign language learning, white (1995, 2003) related strategy use to learner autonomy. She assumed distance language learners are more autonomous and self-regulated learners. She then stated that strategy development is a facilitative factor developing learner independency and autonomy. According to White, "strategy development and learner training are incorporated into the materials as a way of facilitating learner independence and enhancing each student's repertoire of learning skills" (p.3). This view was accepted by other scholar's like

Hurd, Beaven, Ortega (2001), and Hurd (2008) as well. Oxford (2008) also emphasized LLSs within the theoretical framework of autonomy. She proposed a model illustrating relationships among main ideas: independent learning (distance learning), learner autonomy and learning strategies .According to Oxford (2008), “The uses of learning strategies can both reflect and further promote learner autonomy” (p.41), and distance learners use learning strategies and tactics that are relevant to their tasks in order to promote their autonomy.

This is possibly true for EAP distance language learners because they are goal-oriented learners studying for academic purposes. Based on this view EAP distance language learners may be more independent and may therefore, show different patterns in strategy use.

Distance Language Learning Strategies

Many investigators have recently turned to DLLSs and the study of exploring LLSs in distance contexts and has become an important aspect of applied linguistic research. A central issue in these studies is that learners at distance language contexts use, in general, metacognitive strategies more than the other direct and indirect strategies. Ping (2004), White (1995, 2003), and Zahedi and Dorrیمانesh (2008) supported this idea. Learner autonomy and metacognitive strategy use attracted the interest of white (1995) who did a comparative study to see whether the mode of learning (distance vs. face-to-face mode of learning) has an impact on the choice of the strategy. She used a self-report questionnaire developed from O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and suggested that distance learners use metacognitive strategies more than classroom learners and generally have few opportunities to make use of social strategies. In line with this a study by Ping (2004) found that self-management strategies, memory strategies and grammar strategies were most frequently used in DLL contexts. With emphasis on independency and autonomy in DLL, Zahedi & Dorrیمانesh (2008) also focused on the metacognitive LLSs in distance education. This study was done in the context of Iran and is close to the present study. The distinguished feature of their work was not only the relationships between LLSs and distance education but also the effects

of distance on English for Academic Purposes (EAP). It was intended to investigate Metacognitive Learning Strategies (MLS) through part D of Oxford's (1990) SILL questionnaire. Although researchers themselves didn't stated EAP as an important factor in the study, it can be recognized that purposes may have a dramatic influence on LLSs. The study showed that there is no association between the overall use of MLS (autonomy) and academic success of TEFL distance learners at M.A. level. It is important to mention that the unexpected findings may relate to the small size of the sample. Moreover, the participants mostly were newcomers to the system and hadn't had any experiences until the time of sampling. Therefore their strategies might have not been emerged during this short time. Hanson and Wenno (2005) explored the compensatory strategies used for distance English language courses. They made a comparative study between students in a campus-based course and a distance course. In an almost vague research method, they indicated that distance format influences contacts between teachers and students in a positive manner. The study showed that the natural deficiencies of a distance course (such as lack of communication and print-based materials) have to be compensated by effective sources. Distance language learner's writing strategies were also explored by Chan Swee Heng & Han Ai Leen (2005) in an exploratory research. They found that DLLSs among 11 undergraduate students. Quantitative data from SILL showed that students in an online environment become more conscious about strategy use and there is a positive relationship between strategy use and writing awareness. Data also showed that an online learner is turning to an autonomous online learner that is a required condition at distance contexts. Research also proposed "a Profile of a Good Online Strategy User and Profile of a Poor Online Strategy User". Although they clearly provided explanations about which specific parts of the questionnaire were used but what was not clear was how and in what manner the learners used these.

A second central issue in exploring DLLSs is affective strategies. In general, affective strategies are not used in a high level by distance language learners (Hurd, 2008; Najjar, 2011). Hurd investigated affective factors and strategy use in a distance language context through think-aloud verbal protocols research method. He showed that the use of affective

strategies is not high and in some cases the strategies adopted involved cognitive processes. Findings stress the link between affective and cognitive strategies that call conventional strategy classification into question. Participants used cognitive and metacognitive strategies to manage their affective states. In a close study to the present study, Xiao & Hurd (2007) looked for the strategies that distance language learners used in learning a second language. Data retrieved from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire showed that "affective and social strategies proved more popular than other strategies, next came cognitive and metacognitive strategies followed by compensation and memory strategies" (p. 141) but the study didn't indicate whether these strategies used at the high or low level. It proved that distance learners appeared to shift gradually from dependence on teachers to more autonomy in learning.

In addition to LLSs at distance education, some studies appeared recently that tried to examine the possibility of other categories of strategies in distance contexts. Learning and motivation strategies, for example, were experimented by Bagheri, Yamini & Riazi (2009). This experimental research made an attempt to evaluate the degree of strategy use and effects of some independent variables such as age and sex in a distance context. They, however, didn't refer how they controlled extraneous variables in the study. Two questionnaires were used to gather data that are Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) by Pintrich, et al. (1991) and a volitional questionnaire from Kivinen (2003). Based on this study it can be said that motivation, learning strategies and volition strategies are used quite frequently and distance learners use more learning strategies than motivation strategies and more motivation than volition strategies. Moreover, there were significant differences between males/females motivation strategies. Females used more motivation, learning and volition strategies. This paper stressed the role of volition strategies in distance education.

The relationship between DLLSs and learner and learning variables has been investigated in few studies. Oxford et al. in 1993 explored factors which might influence participants' achievements who instructed through

satellite television. These factors included the students' motivation, learning styles, learning strategy use, gender, previous language learning experience, and course level. She found that motivation is the most significant determiner of achievement in a distance context and learning strategy use is also a very influential factor influencing their achievements. Some studies in DLLS have focused on theoretical implication of learning strategies in independent learning (distance context). Hurd & Lewis (2008) did an almost theoretical work on strategy use at distance context and examined strategy use in independent learning. The most important point in this work is the area of independence, autonomy, self-regulation, and self-management in DLL. Ortega et.al (2001), White (1995; 2003), and Oxford (2003) also examined DLL strategies theoretically.

The interpretation of these aforementioned studies is that, on the whole, independent learners are more self-ruled, self-regulated, and autonomous. In the other words EAP learners studying through a DLL programs are expected to be more goal-oriented than face-to-face EAP learners; therefore, it is possible that EAP distance language learners need management strategies more than other strategies. This is the issue that hasn't been considered as yet, so selected as a field of discussion in this study. It can be said that there are no data or calculations about LLSs used by EAP learners, and no studies tried to examine patterns of EAP distance language learners in terms of their gender. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the given distance context. While a given cultural context has an influential influence on how and in what levels participants use LLSs, none of these studies report which contexts (teaching materials) were used. An example of the use of strategies in a distance context that is based on the satellite television would be completely different from those used in a Moodle-based distance context. It would seem, therefore, that further investigations are needed in order to explore LLSs within a new distance context.

The primary focus of this paper is on investigating DLLSs used by EAP learners at a Moodle-based distance context. A secondary aim is to examine the role of gender using LLSs within the given context.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The challenge in this study is to address how do online students use the various cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies to learn. The following research questions are addressed:

1. Which learning strategies are used in distance language learning by the participants?
2. Is it possible that males and females have contrasting patterns of using distance language learning strategies?

The study employs the following hypothesis:

1. There are not specific patterns of using language learning strategies among distance language learners.
2. There are no contrasting patterns of using distance language learning strategies between males and females.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted in one of the ESP courses in Sistan and Baluchistan University on undergraduate students studying Information Technology. The subjects consisted of 60 EFL learners, 39 males and 21 females, all of them were native speakers of Persian with age ranges from 19 to 23. The participants had mostly passed the general English language course. Everyone was given a password to enter the distance course program that was a 4- month course for language learning. They had perused the computer skills such as the basic PowerPoint, Word Processing and Internet search skills and were able to use the computer with minimal help from their teacher who was actually a distance teacher.

Instrument and Procedure

The quantitative instruments for this study were Oxfords' Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL V. 7.0) and a background questionnaire. SILL was checked for validity and reliability many times and in multiple ways (Oxford, 1996). It contains 50 items which are designed for the ESL/EFL students and assess the 6 sides of the

participants' learning strategies (*Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Compensation strategies, Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies, Social strategies*). The present study used Oxford's background questionnaire as the second instrument for data collection but revised and converted it into a shorter one including 6 items to determine the homogeneity of the participants. The questionnaire also contains researcher's comments and explanations in one paragraph. It was filled out by a five Likert-scale choice for each strategy described.

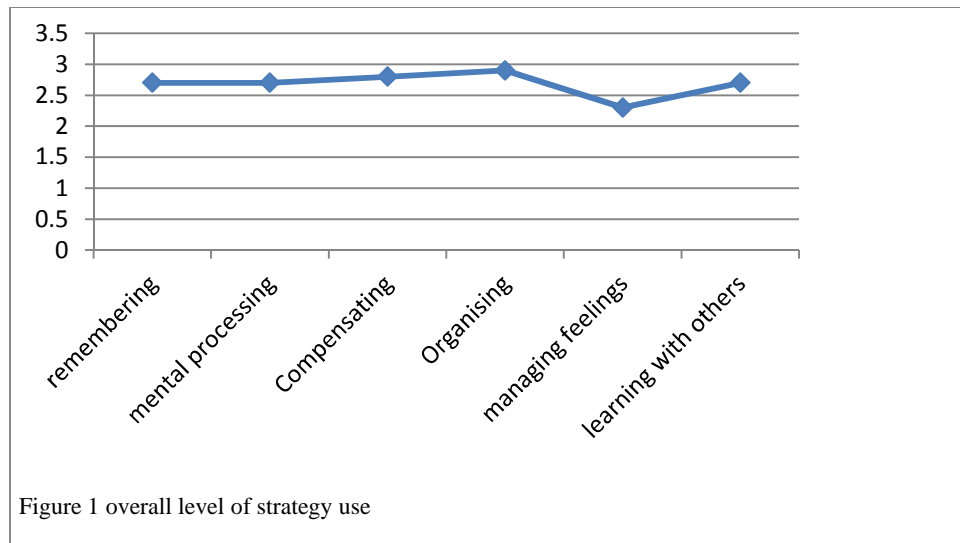
Participants meet each other two times. At first meeting teacher explains different parts of the course to the participants. Then overall questionnaire was introduced to the volunteers including possible answers, places of answers, ratings, and the way of completing background questionnaire. After first meeting, participants started studying as Moodle-based distance language learners. After a period of four months, participants were called for second meeting to complete the questionnaire and it was made clear that there were no right or wrong answers for the items. The time allowed for completing this questionnaire was at about 45 minutes.

Results and Discussion

Results

The background questionnaire showed that the participants (65% male and 35% female) had the same range of age, same academical learning experiences and all of them study English for academic purposes.

The following graph is representing the variety of strategies among participants (figure 1). As plot area in the graph clearly shows *organizing strategies* (Metacognitive strategies) are among the most strategies used by the participants. *Managing feelings* (affective strategies) appear to be the least used strategies. *Remembering more effectively* (memory strategies), *mental processes* (cognitive strategies), and *learning with others* (social strategies) all fall near.



The numerical data also justified graphical data. As seen below in Table 1, the overall mean score of the SILL also demonstrates that the participants of the study were medium strategy users ($M=2.7$, $SD= .50$). Despite there is slightly a low difference between the means of strategy usage, table 1 shows that affective strategies were used the least and Metacognitive strategies the most strategies between distance language learners.

Table 1 mean scores and SD of the SILL and its categories of strategies

	SILL	Memo ry	Cognit ive	Compensa tion	Metacogni tive	Affecti ve	Soci al
Me an	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.9	2.3	2.5
SD	.50	.56	.57	.77	.76	.56	.82
N	60	60	60	60	60	60	60

Note: SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning), SD (Standard deviation), N (Number)

Male/female answers to the SILL questionnaire showed that they employ a general pattern of strategy usage. Descriptive statistics for groups of males and females (table 2) shows that females use more cognitive, compensating, and affective strategy users than males and males used more memory, metacognitive and social strategies in DLL context. Females had a higher mean score (2.76) than males (2.72) which showed that females were more strategic than males.

Independent sample t-test was used to check whether the differences between two sets of mean scores were big enough to reach statistical significance (table 2).

Table 2. Results for comparing means

	groups	M	SD	d	t	Sig	Effect size ^a
Memory strategies	Male	2.78	.54	58	.12	.90	
	female	2.76	.62				
cognitive strategies	Male	2.77	.46	28.52	-.28	.77	
	female	2.83	.75				
compensation strategies	Male	2.85	.65	58	-.18	.85	
	female	2.89	.96				
metacognitive strategies	Male	2.88	.72	58	-.07	.94	
	female	2.90	.84				
affective strategies	Male	2.23	.54	58	-1.22	.22	
	female	2.42	.58				
social strategies	Male	2.59	.83	58	.24	.81	
	female	2.54	.84				
Overall strategy usage	Male	2.72	.40	28.315	-.238	.814	
	female	2.76	.66				

*p<.05

^a Eta squared

As table 2 shows none of the significant levels obtained from comparing means are lower than .05 (significance is not less than .05). It shows that

there was not a significant difference in M/F mean scores and then the differences between two sets of scores were not big enough to show real differences between participants. Another result from SILL questionnaire indicated that based on Oxford (1990) classification, males and females used strategies at *sometimes used* level (between 2.5 – 3.4 scores).

Discussion

EAP sample group is one of the few samples of participants whose LLSs have been studied. Participants in current study were fairly homogenous in terms of their age, learning history and experiences, learning goals, and learning context. These homogeneities were important in exploring LLSs and as Oxford (1995: 200) stated that students from similar backgrounds often use strategies in similar ways. Therefore, the findings were important since all the results obtained from a similar backgrounds group of study.

The overall results indicated that participants tend to use metacognitive strategies more frequently. This finding was consistent with previous similar studies in Iran (Zahedi & Dorriamaneh, 2008; Zare, 2010) and studies at distance contexts (white, 2003). As learners in a distance context for language learning are involved to a much greater degree in self-management, it is possible that part D of the questionnaire got the highest mean scores. It is important to point out that Iranian EFL context may also influence this finding. Since English is considered as a foreign language in Iran and students have not had enough exposure to English language in their daily life, this makes them to be more self-directed in their language learning and try to make out their progress.

The EAP course also intensifies independency and self-direction. Participants needed to learn most of the subjects therefore, they tried to use metacognitive strategies such as finding many ways for learning, noticing their mistakes, planning their learning, thinking about their progress, reading as much as possible, and having clear goals more than other strategies. Notwithstanding its limitations, evidence in this study is sufficient to confirm that Moodle-based distance language learners use metacognitive strategies more than other strategies.

In general, the sample resisted that managing feelings or affective strategies were used least frequently by EAP distance language learners. This observation is perhaps important. Iranian EFL learners are mostly conservative and reserved with their feelings. While this reason pointed out by some researchers such as Zare (2010) in face-to-face language learning it may also be an effective factor in a DLL context. Moreover, lower uses of affective strategies in the current study might either relate to the Moodle-based context or the kinds of items exemplified in the questionnaire. It should be noted that this study has explored language learning strategies through a measurement (Oxford's SILL) that was designed for face-to-face language context.

Few studies explored the role or effect of gender on strategy use at a distance context. The present findings are not consistent with past studies that found significant differences between males and females learning strategies (Hurd, 2008; Bagheri, 2009). On the whole, this study indicated that both males and females were medium strategy users; in addition, they had similar patterns in terms of using learning strategies. This sameness in various parts of the strategies, overall strategy usage, and level of strategy may offer some insights to the nature of distance context (i.e. Moodle-based distance language context) because studies on face-to-face contexts showed that there were differences between males and females patterns of strategy use (Zare, 2010; Chamot, 2004). In other words mode of learning (distance learning) affected the use of LLSs in the way that the differences between male/female groups diminished. These findings need more research to show whether they are specifically relate to the Moodle-based distance context or all the distance contexts are the same. The important fact here is that mode of learning influenced the use of strategies. It is important to point out that the lacks of any interrelation between M/F strategies indicate that DLL strategies are very individual.

Conclusions and Implications

Although DLLs has been relatively studied in the past few decades, the Moodle-based distance context has remained unexplored within learners studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This work tried to elicit

data on using strategy by a small-scale study. The thought processes involved in a DLL context was analyzed to clarify the strategies used by distance language learners. It is important to know how distance language learners adapt their traditional LLSs to an online learning environment and how their strategies related to their sex. The study hypothesized that there are no specific patterns of using LLSs among distance language learners and there are no contrasting patterns of using DLLs between males and females.

The findings of the study, however, showed that Moodle-based distance language learners have their own specific patterns of strategies. Distance language learners are medium strategy users and use strategies *sometimes*. These self-dependent learners tend to use metacognitive strategies more than the other direct and indirect strategies but not significantly. The implication here is that Moodle program has to be revised in terms of strategy-based instruction. It is important perhaps to either replace it with a more strategy-based language program or enhance management learning facilities within the program. Pedagogically, as new tasks requires new strategies (Oxford, 1990), it is important to enhance degree of strategy awareness among participants.

Managing feelings did not appear to be held as particularly important at Moodle-based DLL context and got the least frequency among distance language learners. This can be used as an indicator for further research. It becomes clear from this study that both metacognitive and affective strategies should be taken into account on evaluating a DLL program.

It was proved that M/F Moodle-based distance language learners didn't show any contrasting patterns of using LLSs. In other words, there were not significant and meaningful differences between males and females in terms of using LLSs in a Moodle-based distance context. This implies that there are very individual approaches to DLL. Although this prediction can greatly assist in the effective evaluating of e-learning programs, it is not in line with past studies and requires further research.

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