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IS GENDER A DETERMINING FACTOR IN LANGUAGE STRATEGY USE: AN INQUIRY INTO MULTIPLE FACTORS AT PLAY

ÇİNSİYET DİL STRATEJİ KULLANIMINDA BELİRLEYİCİ BİR FAKTÖR MÜDÜR? : STRATEJİ KULLANIMINDA ÇEŞİTLİ FAKTÖRLERİN İNCELENMESİ

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ABSTRACT

Research on strategy use in language teaching is not a recent topic. Strategy use in second language language education have aroused significant attention since 1970s and a great body of research explored the different dimensions of strategy use in language teaching. Yet, implications of the strategy use for today's language learning remains to be deciphered by language educators and researchers. Specific differences of strategy use among different genders have been recognized by several researchers. The controversial topic of superiority of one gender over the other is without conclusive results. The strategy research among genders is a difficult topic to research because of the non-observable cognitive processes utilized by human mind in acquiring a language (Salahshour et al, 2013, pg. 635). The discussion continues on whether one gender is superior to the other in terms of quality or the quantity of the specific strategy use. Despite the prevailed conception of female superiority, researchers reported that there are other factors that need to be inquired in order to better understand the dynamics of strategy use.

Key Words: gender, strategy use, second language acquisition.

ÖZET

Yabancı dil öğretimi alanında strateji kullanımının araştırılması yeni bir araştırma konusu değildir. 1970'lerden bu yana dil eğitiminde strateji kullanımı araştırmacıların dikkatini çekmiş ve bu konuda birçok araştırma yapılmıştır. Fakat bu alanda yapılan çalışmaların sonuçları hala dil eğitimcileri ve araştırmacıları tarafından incelenmektedir. Bazı

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araştırmacılar tarafından strateji kullanımında cinsiyet faktörünün strateji kullanımını etkileyebileceği fark edilmiştir. Bu konudaki araştırmalar strateji kullanımında kadın veya erkeğin strateji seçimi bağlamında diğerinin üstünlüğünü kanıtlayamamıştır. Bu cinsiyet farklılığını araştırmak bilişsel süreçlerin gözlenememesi nedeniyle güçlük arz eder (Salahshour et al, 2013, pg. 635). Strateji kullanımı konusundaki tartışmalar cinsiyetlerden birinin diğerinden üstün olup olmadığı konusunda devam ediyor. Yaygın görüş kadınların strateji kullanımında üstünlüğünü savunurken, araştırmacılar bu durumun daha iyi anlaşılabilmesi için incelenmesi gereken başka faktörlerin de bulunduğunu ifade ederler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: cinsiyet, strateji kullanımı, ikinci dil edinimi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

There are a combination of factors at play in one's language strategy use. Oxford (1990) draw attention to the complexity of strategic classification of males and females in strategic performance due to the multiplicity of factors influencing the strategy use. Some of these factors are "awareness of learning strategies, stage of learning, task requirements, age, gender, culture, mother tongue background, purpose of learning, personality traits and motivation" (Salahshour et al, 2013, p. 635). It is not possible to study in detail all of the factors at play. This paper will discuss briefly some of the multiplicity of these factors which determine strategy schemes including the gender specific strategy use, and inquire how this knowledge can contribute to less achieving students' adoption of more effective language strategies.

Despite several studies confirming association between higher strategy use by women and specific categories of language strategies, several recent studies contradict any certain claims. Also, studies did not answer effectively as to which of these external factors was most influential in determining patterns of strategy use that result result in successful language use and learning (Salahshour et al, 2013). It has always been a curious point why some learners are better language learners while others struggle to gain a bare proficiency. Although there is great progress in L2 learners' strategy use, some questions concerning how to categorize language strategies and which factors determine the specific use of strategies remain unknown. Different classification systems emerged to classify various learning patterns of learners and look into the issue from different perspectives. According to Grenfel & Harris (199), and Chamot (2005) examination of a range and type of strategies employed by learners is necessary for gaining insights into the metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective processes involved in language learning. A closer look at these internal processes also constitute the base for the exploration and application of strategy training in second language education. Thus, it is more important to get a close understanding of successful strategy use instead of which gender surpasses the other strategically.

To elaborate on the issue of learning strategies , it is necessary to find out which factors influence the learner choices. It is essential to define the strategies and examine the

categorization of strategies. Many attempts to define language learning strategies resulted with different descriptions. Rubin (1975) first used the term “strategy” and his study of strategy use stood out as the earliest study in the field. Later, the definition by Rigney (1978) describes language learning strategies as operations employed by the learner for acquiring, retaining, retrieving or performing. Subsequent studies by Oxford (1996) and Cohen (1998) expanded the conception of strategy by emphasizing the conscious learner choice as a factor that affected the strategy choice (Griffiths, 2003, pg. 369). Cohen (1998) stressed the consciousness dimension of strategy use as this factor determines the strategic value of the actions taken by learners. In light of these definitions, Griffiths (2003) defined language strategies as “specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of learning a language” (pg 369). Understanding learner strategies requires the inquiry into different dimensions, identifying and defining these concepts in relation to other concepts. It would be impossible to highlight all factors influencing effective strategy use and thus, only some of the prevalent factors from previous research will be highlighted.

Learner Autonomy

Effective strategy use is closely allied with the concepts of *learner autonomy*, *self-regulation* and *consciousness* in the review of literature in identifying and categorizing effective learner strategies. The term strategy has the underlying meaning of a consciousness undertaking of the learner for a learning goal (Hsiao&Oxford,2002, pg.369). A certain degree of consciousness affects the learning process as the learner employs strategies to manage and take responsibility for their own learning. Learning strategies entails procedures facilitating a task or goal. “Strategies are most often conscious and goal-driven, especially in the beginning stages of tackling an unfamiliar language task ” and strategies that are initially unfamiliar becomes automatic once the strategy becomes familiar through repeated use. This will allow learners to call upon the required strategy to “conscious awareness” (Chamot, 2005, pg. 112). Thus, learners gain autonomy and learning takes place in the conscious control and awareness of the learner. Thus, it becomes all the more important for the learner to experience which strategies work and do not work. Language teachers become important change agents to initiate effective strategy use as they struggle to become better language learners. The role of the teacher and teaching in language strategies is emphasized with the idea of teachability of the desired strategies to language learners (Kayaoglu, 2012).

Definitions by Holec (1981), Dickinson (1987), Allwright (1990), and Littlewood (1996) emphasized learner autonomy regarding the learner consciousness in strategy use and offered the following definitions: *(a) willingness to perform a language task with little or no assistance, with flexibility according to the situation, and with transferability to other contexts; and (b) relevant action, including the use of appropriate L2 learning strategies for accomplishing the task* (Hsiao&Oxford,2002 p.g. 369). Furthermore, learner autonomy is concerned with self-regulation in explaining the L2 learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, Hsiao&Oxford, 2002). Vygotsky’ theory regarding self-regulation, shed light into the processes

involved in metacognitive strategies and social strategies. Vygotsky's learning theory highlights the importance of collective learning where less capable peers are able to reach much higher levels of competence once they are assisted through teacher guidance or more capable peer(s) support.

Social Support & Scaffolding

As we realize the importance of self-realization in strategy development, we can be better equipped to assist learners in strategic development. Learner internalizes the learning tasks such as monitoring, evaluating, and planning with the help of scaffolding via social interaction with more capable peers or adults. Assistance from outside is removed once learner reaches a self-regulated capacity utilizing strategies in the absence of help from others. Social speech constitutes an important phase of social strategy adoption. Social interaction requires asking questions for help, clarification or verification and these tasks lead to social speech which is internalized to guide action (Hsiao&Oxford,2002,pg. 369). Self-regulation and autonomy can account for the success of learners in the effective strategy use as successful learners *"intentionally, systematically select and combine strategies relevant to the language task at hand and to their own learning style preferences "* (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, 1995,Hsiao&Oxford,2002). It is not only important to adopt many strategies quantitatively but also knowing which situation calls for a specific scheme of strategy. Pedagogical responsibility of teacher is paramount in instilling effective strategies in students and raising awareness in strategy building(Kayaoglu, 2012). Regardless of one's level of language proficiency, manouvering the relevant strategy in order to attain one's goal for communicational purposes is a skill to be attained for any language learner.

Individual Differences

Learners strategies and strategy training is a multifaceted issue. Factors influencing learner choice is another dimension that needs further attention in learner strategy use. L2 learning strategies stand out as an individual variable in second language learning and much research has been devoted to understand how learners employ certain strategies to achieve learning goals (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1996; Cohen, 1998; Hsiao, 2001; MacIntyre & Noels, 1996; Oxford & Cohen, in press; Hsiao&Oxford, 2002). Language educators are interested in understanding why some individuals are better at language learning than others. They question how some individuals utilize best strategies to achieve language goals whereas some others struggle to utilize the bare minimum. If educators can get a closer understanding of the selection process, then they can be better equipped to assist those who need further support in strategy use. Language educators can try to teach conscious adoption of strategies for their learnrs to improve their communicative competence.

Ethnic, Cultural & Contextual Background

In addition to individual differences, there are external factors that influence the use of strategies. Cultural and ethnic background and the learning context play key roles in the strategy choice of learners. Studying effects of culture and context facilitates the teaching of effective strategies. It facilitates teaching by identifying which strategies are used in different

contexts and which factors are at play in the utilization of specific strategies (Chamot, 2005, pg.124). The context of a learning situation and cultural values of the society are inherent in the specific strategies of that learning context.

Farzad Salahshour, Mahnaz Sharifib, NedaSalahshour(2013) and Radwan (2011) are some of the researchers who pointed out the significance of context in the choice of strategies for learners. Thus, the role of context is studied to account for the differences in strategy use and offer appropriate strategy training in various learning environments (Bedell and Oxford, 1996; Grainger, 1997;Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Politzer, 1983; Reid, 1987; Wharton, 2000; Radwan, 2011; Salahsour&Sharifi,2013). For instance, a culture that favors individualism and competitiveness will develop a competition-based education system and in this system individual work will emerge as a popular asset. Thus, learners in this context would prefer working alone rather than employing social strategies of a community approach (Chamot,2005, pg. 125). Similarly, individual exertion of strategy will be valued over collaboration-oriented peer strategy. USA educational context would be a perfect example for this type of learning environment because individualism is favored as a sought personality trait in this context.

Gender & Other Factors

Radwan (2011) studied the gender and strategy use in his research and concluded that the results indicated that the role of context played a major role in the selection of strategies. Research on gender has resulted in some contradictory results. Some of the past research on gender differences with regard to strategy use indicate a tendency to use more social learning strategies, more memory and metacognitive strategies on the part of the females (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Khalil, 2005, Radwan, 2011 p. 121). However, FatemehZarei (2013) in her study found that males outperformed females in all strategic categories in frequency. Also, in this study social strategy is found to be used equally frequently by males and females. Moreover, there have been other studies which found no distinction between genders in terms of strategy use (Wharton 2000& Shmais 2003; Radwan,2011, p. 121).

As more research continues to be carried out in gender-related strategy use, there are a few studies which indicated male superiority in language strategies. This made researchers re-question the previous conceptualization of female superiority. Omani culture could be a good example for this assertion. In contrast to several previous research findings supporting female superiority in social strategies, Omani culture presents male superiority in social strategy use. The Omani findings also pinpoint that male students in Omani used slightly more memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies than female students (Radwan, 2011). This finding can be interpreted as a consequence of Omani society's tribal kinship promoting establishing of better relationships and maintaining social and political importance over females. In this study, male students demolished the common assumption that female students display better social skills.

If we inquire into why such a result came about in this study, it is possible to conclude that conservative and traditional culture of Oman might have prevented females from interacting effectively with people from the opposite sex (Radwan,2011, p.137). Also, females could be exposed to such social situations very rarely due to cultural restrictions on gender. Therefore, females might have failed in using efficient social strategies, highlighting the importance of cultural and contextual factors shaping individual strategy use. Hence, what we categorize as gender- based individual differences are not divorced from the cultural and contextual factors which shape those choices.

2. METHODOLOGY

An extensive body of research conducted on multiple aspects of the strategy use pointed out various topics. Our study is based on the research articles from 1970s to 2015. We selected to study as many articles as we can on the topic of strategy use, but focused on gender-related studies. Various approaches and perspectives of language strategy use is analyzed, but particularly strategy use in relation to gender is the starting point of our study.

We evaluated and interpreted the findings of the studies to reach concrete conclusions and examine the issue from a wider perspective. We did not notice sharp classifications or definite conclusions on the role of any factors on strategy use. Therefore, we attempted to examine commonalities in order to better identify common characteristics of learners and their patterns of strategy use. The most influential factor appeared to be sociolinguistics background of the learner and the features of the learning context. We realized the difficulty of differentiating of the individual from his/her social setting. The studies supported this view by emphasizing the cultural aspects of strategy use over individual orientation in decision-making mechanism. This highlights a move from gender-based study into a more holistic approach when strategic competence is inquired. Qualitative methodology is utilized in interpreting the concepts and data of various research articles on strategy use. The concepts in these articles are categorized under multiple factors and sub-categories. The initial expectation of gender distinction in strategy behavior as individual differences pointed to a need for more complex analysis of strategy use in relation to culture, context, ethnic/national background, age, and socioeconomic status among others.

3. FINDINGS

Pedagogical Implications

Strategy research holds classroom implications for language teachers and researchers. Strategy based research aims to teach using specific actions and techniques when learning a second language. According to Ellis (1995) teachers can prepare learners to utilize certain strategies in their language practices. This scaffolding could include situations or scenarios

one can face in real life and the goal would be to instill linguistic and non-linguistic behavior in learners (e.g. linguistic: how to ask for directions and non-linguistic: pointing to the location/direction). Grenfell and Harris (1999) emphasizes importance of strategy research indicating that “less successful language learners can be taught new strategies, thus helping them become better language learners” (cited in Chamot, 2005, pg. 112). If we could make students aware of the strategies they use, they can identify specific strategies and repeat them when needed. Strategies to be taught vary according to the task and learner needs. Research on strategy aims to explore strategies of successful language learners to get a closer understanding of the cognitive processes utilized in order to teach these effective strategies to less successful language learners (Hosenfeld, 1977; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). Hence, a positive approach to strategy teaching highlights the conceptualization of “teachability of learning strategies” (Kayaoglu, 2012, pg. 14) . Language learners thought to improve their language learning and utilize strategies by using this newly adapted strategies.

4. CONCLUSION

This research did not find a novel result when compared to previous research, however it highlighted difficulty of gender-related assertions as well as importance of social factors when self/ individual strategy choices are considered. More research needs to be carried out to further understand the characteristics and differences of female and male language learners in different learning contexts. Despite the contradictory results in terms of female and male characteristics in strategy use, one can deduce that cultural and contextual factors do not only affect individual choices of strategies, but also have significant bearings in the gender-specific strategic choices. Depending on which cultural context one resides, the social implications of success can display alterations. One obvious deduction from various studies on strategy use is the importance of cultural and contextual factors not only in affecting individual choice of strategies but also their effect in determining educational norms and expectations (i.e. Omani educational culture versus USA educational culture). Being aware of the intricate web of relations and factors in strategy use, enable educators looking into effective and ineffective strategies employed by learners in their social contexts. This recognition will enable educators to distinguish effective strategies from less efficient ones, build upon effective strategies pedagogically, and teach less proficient learners conscious strategy tasks in order to instill in them strategic competence.

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