

The role of Iraqi EFL learners' out-of-class study strategies in their language achievement

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Abstract

One of the ways that can help the learners receive adequate and authentic linguistic input is the employment of out-of-class study strategies. The purpose of the current study is investigating how the use of out-of-class study strategies is related with language achievement, gender, and language proficiency among Iraqi learners of English. In total, 74 Iraqi male and female language learners participated in the study. The data on the use of out-of-class study strategies were collected by administering the out-of-class study strategies questionnaire. The collected data were analyzed using a combination of Spearman correlation coefficient and independent samples *t*-tests. On the basis of the data analysis, it was found that there is a positive and significant relationship between the use of out-of-class study strategies and English language achievement among Iraqi language learners. Furthermore, significant difference was found between the high proficiency and low proficiency learners in terms of using out-of-class study strategies but not between male and

female learners. It is concluded that out-of-class study strategies need to be further highlighted and be subject of direct instructions.

Keywords: out-of-class study strategies; language learning strategies; English proficiency; language achievement; gender

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition is a complicated process and requires a huge amount of input and practice. However, this process can be even more challenging when learning a second language is going to happen in a setting in which the language is considered a foreign language. Iraq is a country whose citizens speak Arabic and Kurdish as the official languages of their country. English and French are considered the foreign languages taught in schools and private language institutes in Iraq, though English has gained a privileged status in the educational system of Iraq.

Due to the complexity of second language learning and the need for a lot of exposure to a second language, the limited amount of formal instruction inside classrooms may not be adequate for learning a second language in a foreign language context. However, more exposure to language input out of classroom may compensate for the lack of language input in a foreign language learning context. Research shows that successful language learners use language learning strategies frequently outside classroom. For instance, Huang and Naerssen (1987) reported that students who were more successful in oral communication used strategies like speaking with other students and native speakers, listening to radio programs, or watching films and TV programs, etc.

Research studies that specifically pertained to out-of-class study strategies are limited while there are tons of studies on language learning strategies. Language learning strategies have been explained and classified by several researchers (e.g., Naiman et al., 1978; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975), and all of them have emphasized the positive role of out-of-class study strategies in second language learning. The present study attempts to shed light on how out-of-class study strategies by Iraqi English learners affect their language achievement. In addition, it is probed how male and female learners as well as low and high proficient learners are different in terms of out-of-class study strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language learning strategies

The topic of language learning strategies has been one of the hottest and most researched area in second and foreign language learning. The idea of searching and finding the behaviors of the successful second language learners with the aim of helping the less successful learners adopt more effective strategies or modifying their ineffective strategies have been a very tempting area of study. Numerous studies have been carried out to connect the language learning strategies to language learning achievement and proficiency (e.g., Al-Qahtani, 2013; Liu, 2010; Platsidou & Kantaridou, 2014; Rao, 2016; Wu, 2008). Most of the studies on language learning strategies and language proficiency have suggested that more successful learners use language learning strategies more frequently and use broader range of strategies.

Various definitions for language learning strategies have been offered by such researchers as Oxford (1990), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), or Rubin (1987). For instance, Rubin (1987) defined language learning strategies as steps and techniques used by a language learner to enhance language learning process. What seems common in all the definitions of language learning strategies is that language learning strategies are conscious and goal-directed efforts that target various aspects of language learning including speaking, reading, writing, listening, vocabulary, etc. In order to better capture the essence of language learning strategies, researchers tried to specify and classify the strategies that are actually employed by language learners. Rubin (1990) classified language learning strategies into three types of strategies that directly or indirectly contribute to the language learning. The three types of language learning strategies by Rubin (1990) were learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. O'Malley (1990) divided the language learning strategies into three types of strategies: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and socio-affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are those strategies that deal directly with the process of language learning and include strategies like repeating, grouping, memorizing, etc. Metacognitive strategies are higher order strategies that deal with decision making and planning about the whole process of language learning and include such strategies as monitoring and evaluating one's progress. Socio-affective strategies are concerned with strategies that require interaction with others such as seeking cooperation and asking questions. The most known and widely mentioned classification of language learning strategies is the one proposed by Oxford (1990), known as SILL (*Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*). She grouped the language learning strategies into direct and indirect categories. The direct category

includes memory, cognitive, and compensatory strategies while the indirect category contains metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

Some studies have focused on the contribution of language learning strategies to the language learning and proficiency of the L2 (second language) learners. Habók and Magyar (2018) studied how language learning strategies are related to foreign language attitude, proficiency, and school achievement of secondary students in Years 5 and 8 in Hungary. As the results of their study show, most of the Hungarian students employed metacognitive strategies. Furthermore, it was found that there were significant differences between more and less proficient learners in terms of strategy use in memory, cognitive, social, and metacognitive categories. The metacognitive, social, and memory strategies were the primary strategies influencing foreign language attitude. With respect to strategy use and language proficiency, it was concluded that more proficient learners are more frequent strategy users. Similar findings have been reported by Rao (2016). Rao (2016) reported that learners' language proficiency is significantly affected by strategy use. According to Rao (2016), more proficient learners use more language learning strategies. The study by Wu (2008) indicates that cognitive strategies are among the most influential strategies in language proficiency.

2.2. Out-of-class study strategies

One of the earliest works on out-of-class study strategies in second language learners can be attributed to Pickard (1996). As mentioned by Pickard (1996), research in second language learning strategies just mention the out-of-class study strategies and pass on without discussing and analyzing them closer. Most language learners may spend a good amount of time out of classroom for learning a second language. Such learning techniques have been termed out-of-class study strategies by Pickard (1996) to be connected with language learning strategies studied by Rubin (1975), Naiman et al. (1978), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and Oxford (1990). Naiman et al. (1978) identified the language related activities in addition to classroom related activities, such as extra reading, reading novels, listening to audio tapes, and listening to news programs as ways to be actively engaged in foreign language learning. They called such an approach to language learning active task approach.

The role of out-of-class study strategies has also been emphasized by Bialystok (1978, 1981). Bialystok (1978, 1981) identified four types of out-of-class strategies: formal practicing, functional practicing, monitoring, and inferencing. Bialystok (1981) found that functional practicing as an out-of-class study strategy contribute to better performance at language tasks. Functional practice refers to language activities that promote the communicative use of language:

going to movies, talking to natives, etc. Extensive reading and reading for pleasure can also be considered as instances of out-of-class study strategies. Elley and Mangubhai (1983) studied the effect of extensive reading and Hafiz and Tudor (1989) studied the effect of reading for pleasure on learners' language progress. Elley and Mangubhai (1983) found that extensive reading has positive effect on reading and listening skills of Fijian school children and Hafiz and Tudor (1989) found that Pakistani students in the UK achieved significant improvements in their language test scores.

Pickard (1996) can be considered one of the earliest researchers that focused specifically on out-of-class study strategies in second language learning. He studied the out-of-class learning strategies of a group of proficient German speakers of English and attempted to identify and quantify the out-of-class learning activities employed by these learners during their study of English. The study found that the most-cited activities are the passive ones of reading and listening. In a separate study, Pickard (2007) did a case study on three language learners to build profiles of out-of-class study strategies by second language learners. The first person reported that the first thing that influenced her learning was her love of learning English as a means of communication to overcome her real life tasks. As a member of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, she needed to do her activities in English. She shared novels among her friends and listened to *British Forces Broadcasting Service*. However, her main English activities were those that occurred in her dance classes because the instruction was in English and the members were from overseas. In the second case, an Austrian person was inspected about the language learning experiences. He reported an interest in reading and undertaking reading strategies with considerable frequency. He subscribed to *Newsweek* and read novels a few days a week. Watching TV and listening to radio programs were other out-of-class study strategies used by him. The last person reported that her main out-of-class study strategies were listening to *British Forces Broadcasting Service* and watching TV. He had spent sometime in the USA and she praised the opportunities to speak with native speakers of English. All three learners had acquired great level of English proficiency and the common link among them in terms of out-of-class study strategies was reading newspapers and novels and listening to radio programs. In a more recent study on out-of-class study strategies, Marlyna and Noor Saazai (2016) reported that international students in Malaysia prefer to learn English by watching TV programs and movies, using internet, digital dictionaries, and computerized spell and grammar checkers. Noor Saazai, Melor, and Mohamed Amin (2013) found that learners employ different strategies to complete their course assignments.

However, it should be noted that all studies on out-of-class study strategies have not pointed to positive results. For example, Marefat and Barbari (2009) investigated the relationship between out-of-class study strategies and

reading comprehension which did not lead to positive findings. Tagashira et al. (2010) studied the relationship between out-of-class study strategies and Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) which, again, did not yield positive results. Although Marefat and Barbari (2009) and Tagashira et al. (2010) explained that inadequacy of out-of-class study strategies questionnaires and lack of learners' insight on out-of-class study strategies might have intervened in revealing a positive picture of out-of-class study strategies, it should not be ignored that many research findings are context dependent and error in research process is often inevitable. Accordingly, it may be inferred that out-of-class study strategies need to be locally investigated and interpreted.

3. Research questions

With the need for gaining insight on Iraqi learners' behaviors in learning English out-of-classroom and because of the fact that research findings in other English learning settings may not be readily applicable to Iraqi context of English language learning, the study set to probe the out-of-class study strategies by Iraqi EFL learners in relation to their English language achievement, gender, and English language proficiency level. Therefore, the research questions covering the purpose of the study were formulated as follows:

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iraqi EFL learners' out-of-class study strategies and their language achievement?
2. Are there any significant differences between male and female Iraqi EFL learners in terms of out-of-class study strategies?
3. Are there any significant differences between "low proficient" and "high proficient" Iraqi EFL learners in terms of out-of-class study strategies?

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 74 male and female university students studying English at the junior level at a university in Iraq. They had all passed more than four semesters in English and were proficient enough to understand and answer the items in the original questionnaire. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old. For the purpose of classifying participants into two groups of low proficiency and high proficiency learners, the researcher used language scores from the semester prior to the study. The classification was done by calculating the mean score of the participants in language achievement and then assigning

those whose language achievement scores were lower than the mean score to the low proficiency group and those with scores higher than the mean score to the high proficiency group.

4.2. Instruments

An out-of-class language learning questionnaire was developed to find out how out-of-class strategies are used by Iraqi EFL learners. For the preparation of the questionnaire, previous studies such as Pickard (2007), Pickard (1996), Marlyna and Noor Saazai (2016), and personal experiences were drawn on. The questionnaire included 25 items that were grouped into four categories: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In the questionnaire, 4 items dealt with out-of-class strategies for speaking (practicing English with friends and classmates, chatting in English in social media, talking with oneself, and recording his/her voice and monitoring his/her speaking); 5 items dealt with listening (listening to radio programs, listening to audio recordings like IELTS recordings, watching TV programs in English, watching English movies, and listening to English songs); 8 items asked the participants about reading strategies (reading short stories, reading novels, reading internet pages, reading magazines, reading reviews and opinions about different topics on internet, asking friends or teachers to suggest good readings, learning vocabularies, expressions, idioms while reading, and asking for help from teachers or friends about reading problems); finally, 8 items dealt with out-of-class strategies for writing (practicing letter writing, summarizing stories, asking a more proficient person to correct his/her writings, spelling practice, using thesaurus for finding appropriate words when writing, writing English posts in social media and forums on internet, using templates to practice writing, and writing songs and poems in English). The questionnaire was a five-point Likert scale type and had proved to have a high reliability (Cronbach alpha = 0.87).

Regarding the content validity of the questionnaire, experts' judgment was drawn on. The procedure for experts' judgment had three phases. In the first phase, three university professors in the field of applied linguistics were invited to help with the content validity of the questionnaire. Upon the professors' approval, the first draft of the questionnaire was sent to the professors and they were asked to comment on the categories and the items of the questionnaire. Previous studies on out-of-class study strategies (e.g., Pickard, 1996, 2007; Marlyna & Noor Saazai, 2016) were also sent along. In the second phase, professors' comments regarding the adequacy of the categories, the congruity between the categories and the items, comprehensiveness of the items, and intelligibility of the items were taken into account and the draft was revised accordingly. In the last phase, the corrected draft was sent to the professors again for final comments.

The final comments were concerned with rewording of a few items in the questionnaire. As for measuring the language achievement of the learners, learners' scores from the previous semester were used. To this end, the learners' language achievement scores from previous semester were considered as their language achievement scores.

4.3. Procedure

The required data for finding the answers to the research questions were language achievement and out-of-class strategy use scores. As the first step of the data collection procedure, a sample of 200 university students were selected. The criteria for the inclusion of participants were the education level of the students and their English language proficiency. In order to have access to a sample of 200 language learners, the help of some university professors was sought. Through checking the instruction schedule of the students and making the necessary arrangements with the professors, the researcher managed to administer the out-of-class study strategy questionnaire to a sample of 200 students. When administering the questionnaire, the researcher was present and guided the participants in understanding the items of the questionnaire. All the guidance was carried out in the native language of the participants (the Arabic language). However, the number of participants was later reduced to 74 because many of the questionnaires were left incomplete by the students. In other words, only 74 completed questionnaires were usable for data analysis.

The 74 questionnaires were then scored by assigning a number to each item of the questionnaires and computing the total scores. Each item of the questionnaire needed to be answered by choosing one of the options *always*, *frequently*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, and *never*. Number 0 was assigned to the option *never*, number 1 to the option *rarely*, number 2 to the option *sometimes*, number 3 to the option *frequently*, and number 4 to the option *always*. Therefore, by adding up the individual numbers of the questionnaire items, a maximum score of 100 and a minimum score of 0 could be computed for each student (it should be noted that there were totally 25 items in the questionnaire). In addition to out-of-class study strategy scores, the language achievement scores of the learners from previous semester were used as a measure of language achievement. Next, the mean score of the students in terms of language achievement was computed for the purpose of identifying the low proficiency and high proficiency learners. To this end, students who had scores below the mean score were classified as low proficiency learners and those with scores above the mean score were classified as high proficiency learners. After collecting the language achievement and out-of-class study strategies scores and assigning the learners to low proficiency and high proficiency groups, data were ready for analysis.

For statistical analysis of the data, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 19) was used. The procedure of data analysis included describing data (mean scores and standard deviations) and inferential analysis of data (Spearman correlation and independent samples t-test test for differences).

5. Results

The first research question set out to investigate how out-of-class study strategy use and language achievement are related among the Iraqi language learners. To find the answer to this question, the out-of-class study strategy scores and language achievement scores of the language learners were correlated using the statistical test of Spearman correlation coefficient. As can be seen in Table 1, it was found that out-of-class strategy use and language achievement are positively and significantly related ($\rho = 0.33, p < .05$). In other words, the more a learner use out-of-class study strategies, the higher language scores s/he can achieve.

The second research question probed any significant difference between male and female language learners in terms of out-of-class study strategies. The answer to this question was sought by comparing the strategy use scores of the male and female participants. Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the male and female participants in out-of-class study strategy use.

Table 1 Means and standard deviations for out-of-class strategy use for male and female participants

	Groups	N	M	SD	Std. error
Strategy scores	Male	45	54.51	7.61	2.02
	Female	29	53.31	8.87	2.76

Table 1 shows that male participants scored 54.51 ($SD = 7.61$) and female participants scored 53.31 ($SD = 8.87$). Apparently, there was not much difference between male and female participants in terms of out-of-class study strategy use. To make sure about any significant difference between the male and female learners in terms of out-of-class study strategy use, an independent samples *t*-test was run on the strategy scores of the male and female learners. Unsurprisingly, it turned out that the difference in out-of-class strategy use failed to reach significance ($t = 0.35, p = .72$).

The third research question aimed to probe any significant difference between low proficient and high proficient language learners in terms of out-of-class study strategies. As in the case of the second research question, strategy use scores of the low proficient and high proficient learners were compared. Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the low proficient

and high proficient participants in out-of-class study strategy use. The data show that low proficient participants scored 51.21 ($SD = 5.32$) while high proficient participants scored 54.61 ($SD = 4.14$). An independent samples t -test showed that the difference was significant in this case ($t = 3.06, p = 0.00$).

Table 2 Means and standard deviations for out-of-class strategy use for low proficient and high proficient participants

	Groups	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Std. error
Strategy scores	Low proficient	39	51.21	5.32	.85
	High proficient	35	54.61	4.14	.70

6. Discussion

The present study aimed at exploring the relationship between the use of out-of-class study strategies and English language achievement among Iraqi English language learners. Furthermore, it was attempted to understand how differently male and female language learners and low proficiency and high proficiency language learners use out-of-class study strategies. As the results of data analysis show, language achievement was significantly related to out-of-class study strategy use and significant difference existed between high and low proficiency language learners in terms of out-of-class study strategy use. However, there was no significant difference between male and female learners in the context of using out-of-class study strategies.

The fact that out-of-class study strategy use was positively and significantly related to language achievement and significant difference existed between low proficiency and high proficiency learners was in line with the initial expectation of the researchers. In the field of second language learning and teaching, it has long been a common notion that second language learning is a lengthy process that requires a lot of input and authentic interactions. Certainly, the amount of input received by language learners inside the classroom is not enough for most language learners to learn a second language to a satisfactory degree. However, encouraging language learners to take an active role in their language learning experience may compensate for the inadequacy of language input and interactions they receive in classrooms. This can be achieved when learners take an active role in receiving language input through out-of-class study strategies. Previous studies have pointed out that out-of-class study strategies contribute to successful language learning experience. Pickard (2007) studied the language learning activities of three people who had acquired high level of proficiency in English. These people had high profiles of reading newspapers and novels outside the classroom and listening to the radio programs. In a study in Malaysia by

Marlyna and Noor Saazai (2016), it was found that learners preferred to learn English through watching television program and using technology related tools such as the Internet, digital and online dictionaries, and computerized spelling and grammar checkers. Mohammadi and Moini (2015) reported that to foster learners' active role in their learning, greater attention should be paid to the autonomous language learning activities outside the classroom.

Another finding of the current study which seems difficult to explain was that no significant differences existed between male and female language learners in terms of using of out-of-class study strategies. In other words, the present study showed that both male and female language learners used out-of-class study strategies to the same extent. Gender has long been considered a source of individual difference in language learning literature. Oxford (1990) states that gender affects the frequency and types of strategies employed by language learners. In several studies it has been shown that females are more frequent users of language learning strategies (Green & Oxford 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Peacock & Ho, 2003). However, there are also studies that indicate no significant differences between male and female language learners in terms of using language learning strategies (e.g. Hosseini, Rouhi, & Jafarigohar, 2015; Poole, 2005). Poole (2005) compared the academic reading strategies of 248 (male = 138; female = 110) advanced college ESL students. The results of his study showed that both male and female language learners used strategies with medium to high frequencies. Poole (2005) concluded that language proficiency is a stronger determiner of strategy use than gender. Hosseini et al. (2015) investigated the reading comprehension and reading strategies of Iranian EFL learners and found no significant difference between males and females in terms of reading comprehension and overall reading strategy use. On the basis of the results of the current study and previous literature, it can be stated that gender can potentially affect the out-of-class study strategy use but it is not absolute.

The findings of the present study have some implications to the field of language learning and teaching. The first implication of the study concerns the language teachers. Since the results of the study indicated that out-of-class study strategies are positively related to language achievement of the language learners, teachers, particularly Iraqi English teachers, can take advantage of techniques that promote out-of-class study strategies for the purpose of enhancing foreign language learning. Such techniques can be simple verbal encouragements to persuade the learners use of out-of-class study strategies to systematic instruction of strategies. Oxford and Gkonou (2018) described a method of strategy instruction called *fully informed, overt strategy instruction*. According to this method of strategy instruction, strategy instruction contains finding out students' current learning strategies, choosing a new strategy (or a combination of strategies)

that students need the most for current tasks, demonstrating and naming the strategy for the students, explaining why it is helpful, asking students to try out the strategy in an authentic task, asking students to decide how useful the strategy was, and reminding students to use it again, that is, transfer it to new, relevant tasks (Oxford & Gkonou, 2018, p. 407).

However, simply expecting the teachers to instruct the learners employ out-of-class study strategies seems unrealistic. In other words, teachers first need to be trained how to instruct the learners to employ out-of-class study strategies. In strategy instructions, teachers should be aware of the sources of individual differences such as cultural differences, educational history, personality differences, motivation, and strategy knowledge of the learners (Chamot, 2018). All these variables may affect the ways language learners learn or use strategies.

7. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study two main conclusions can be made. First, it can be concluded that use of out-of-class study strategies plays an important role in the second language learning experience of the Iraqi EFL learners. The study showed that out-of-class study strategy use had positive and significant relationship with language achievement of Iraqi language learners. Secondly, it can be concluded that gender as a source of individual differences does not always lead to differences in learners' language learning strategies. In other words, factors contributing to learners' selection of strategies to learn a second language work in a complicated manner and picking up individual factors, such as gender, to be responsible for differences in learners' language learning experiences may not work all the time and in all settings.

The use of out-of-class study strategies and language achievement were positively related. However, to conclude that such relationship is always true is questionable. There is the possibility that several factors affect the relationship between language achievement and use of out-of-class-study strategies. For example, the use of strategies may not lead to better language learning or performance if the strategies are not used systematically and in harmony with other strategies. Several researchers have emphasized the strategic use of strategies for enhancing language learning (e.g., Cohen & Weaver, 2006; Ghafournia, 2014; Green & Oxford, 1995). Accordingly, it is suggested that more replications of the present study, while controlling such factors as types and patterns of strategies, should be conducted in various English language teaching settings to obtain a more accurate picture of out-of-class study strategies and language achievement.

One limitation of the study was that out-of-class study strategy use was measured using a questionnaire. In using a questionnaire, there is a possibility

that respondents are not expressing their true responses for different reasons. In addition, questionnaires may not contain all types of out-of-class study strategies particularly the personalized strategies. Accordingly, it is suggested that in future studies on out-of-class study strategy use and language achievement, more exploratory measures such as think aloud protocol and interviews are used to collect more information about out-of-class study strategies

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