



STRATEGY-BASED INSTRUCTION: EXPLICIT STRATEGY TRAINING AND IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' TEST PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) is a learner-focused approach to teaching that emphasizes employing learning strategies with the goal of enhancing both learner autonomy and proficiency in language contexts. SBI is multifaceted phenomenon and note taking strategy as one of its subcategories is writing down the main concepts, significant points, outline, or digest of information presented orally or in writing (Brown, 2007). The present paper reported the findings of a study that investigated the effect of explicit strategy training on learners' achievement test scores in a higher education setting. To conduct the study, sixty participants in the same level of proficiency were selected purposely (N=60). They were taught how to take note based on the Cornell method (particular note taking method). Both questionnaire and interview were applied to elicit the attitudes of participants about strategy training in listening comprehension. The results indicated that note taking training strategy, in contrast to Iranian EFL learners' attitudes has significant effects on Iranian listening test performance. However, the findings demonstrated that explicit strategy training is ineffective when there is not enough time to do so.

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Keywords: Strategy-based instruction, Explicit strategy training, Note taking strategy, Cornell method, Learning strategies, Listening comprehension.

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Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the explicit strategy training in a strategy-based instruction. The study has focused on new methodology in conducting strategy-based learning environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main responsibilities of teachers in educational settings is teaching learners how to learn than simply the transmission of knowledge (Wong and Nunan, 2011). Teachers are in charge to teach learners how to recognize their learning styles and teach them appropriate learning strategies that fit their learning styles. In such circumstances, teachers deal with a functional notion that was called Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) by the researchers.

In two recent decades, many language teachers and researchers accepted the significance of helping language learners to become more effective and autonomous learners (Oxford, 1990; Oxford and Leaver, 1996). All we know that language learning and teaching is a complex phenomenon and SBI is an ameliorative solution that might simplify this intricate process. To overcome learners' gaps in the process of second or foreign language learning, teachers teach their students various learning strategies. They are taught how conquest over their learning hindrances. SBI helps learners to become more aware of available strategies, understand how to organize and use them systematically and efficiently, and to learn when and how to transfer strategies to new learning contexts (Yang, 2002).

Being awareness of their learning strategies is extremely important to learners as the greater awareness they have of what they are doing, they will be more successful language learners. However, in most language classrooms, learners are unaware of suitable strategies that could help to them in their dealing with the reading materials. They would be able to notice inconsistencies in a text and employ appropriate strategies to make these inconsistencies more understandable (Baker and Brown, 1984). To exemplify the intricate situation, Williams and Burden (1997) have pointed out that language teachers should empower learners by assisting them in acquiring the new knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to become more autonomous learners who can take responsibility for their own learning.

Language teachers have employed learning strategies in their classrooms with the explicit purpose of helping learners to progress their language knowledge. These strategies are the conscious and intentional way of solving a problem or coping with a learning task that are used by learners individually to facilitate language learning environment and language learning process (Tsai, 2009). There are different classifications for learning strategies among teachers and researchers. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classification is the most well known. They have been differentiated language learning strategies into four distinct categories: cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective. Cognitive learning strategies are those strategies that generally dealing with identification, storage, and retrieval of new language elements. Applying grammar rules in a new context is an example of cognitive learning strategies. The second type of learning strategies is metacognitive strategies that deal with pre-planning and self-assessment, on-line preparation, monitoring and evaluation. These strategies allow learners to control the learning process by helping them organize their efforts to design, organize, and evaluate target language performance. Social learning strategies include learners' intentional behaviors that they select for interacting with others in their language learning contexts. Asking questions for clarification, helping a classmate to

complete a task, or cooperating with peers are some of the examples of social learning strategies. The fourth kind of learning strategy according to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classification is affective strategies. They were used by teachers to adjust learners' motivation, emotions, and attitudes towards language learning. Strategies that are used for reducing anxiety, self-encouragement, and for self-reward are clear examples of affective strategy.

Unsophisticated use of language learning strategies has been identified as one of the most prominent obstacles that learners have to cope with in most educational contexts (Macaro, 2006); therefore, the present study investigated the effect of explicit strategy training on learners' performance and achievement. To do so, the researchers selected note taking strategy as it is largely effective in most language classrooms. One of these learning strategies is note taking. Note taking is writing down the main idea, important points, outline, or summary of information presented orally or in writing (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Brown, 2007). Note taking is writing down the important information in a text in your own words (Nunan, 2001). While reading or listening, note taking is the writing down of main points, reactions, questions, or other responses (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). Such notes may be used for discussion or help to organize and retain information.

There is no difference between note taking and note making in most references, but Neville (2006) distinguished these two terms. Neville (2006) stated that:

Note taking is when you simply write what you hear in lectures, or from printed texts. If the subject is an unfamiliar one, this is often inevitable, particularly with international students that are hard to understand, follow, and note what the lecturer is saying. On the other hand, note making follow on from taking notes and happens when you are reviewing your notes and reorganize them in a way that makes more sense or leads to more obvious connections between points; or when you attempt to produce this type of note in the first place, particularly as you read (p. 5).

There are three kinds of note taking which are *linear note taking*, *visual or pattern note taking*, and *voice note taking* (Nunan, 2001; Neville, 2006). One of the remarkable advantages of note taking is better recalling of information for the exam (Barbier *et al.*, 2006; Hayati and Jalilifar, 2009; Tsai, 2009). Reviewing their note helps learners turn their input into intake (Kiewra, 1985; Beecher, 1988). Many teachers and researchers believed that learners can recall all of the information that's presented in the classroom and reduce the role of memory in recalling their lesson when they review their notes (Kiewra, 1983; Gordon and Courtney, 1991; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Stefanou *et al.*, 2008). Note taking is a good strategy for those who have not active short memory (Kiewra, 1987).

Note taking strategy can be taught. Many textbooks and teaching materials have been designed to teach note taking strategy and other strategies as well. Teachers and researchers have introduced multifarious techniques that are used for developing note taking strategy. Unfortunately, in Iran there is no special note taking training course in high schools or even in universities. Even though different techniques are taught and practiced in universities for understanding lectures, few learners are taught note taking strategy and they just use their experiences in note taking. Note taking can

also promote listening comprehension, but many variables can influence note taking during listening; such as environment, instruments, and subjects; noisy or quiet environment, the scope of listeners' vocabulary, topic, and length of the lecture. There are also moderate variables that are ignored in researches about note taking. One of these variables is gender. There is no clear evidence that shows the effects of explicit strategy training on learners' performances in listening comprehension test in Iranian EFL context; therefore, this particular study investigated the effects of explicit note taking training (in a strategy-based instruction curriculum) on learners' performance in listening comprehension tests.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Language learning strategies have received ever mounting attention in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Rubin and Thompson, 1994; McDonough, 1995). Researchers and language educators in many different contexts have been in search of ways to help learners become more successful in their efforts to learn and communicate in foreign languages contexts. The application of foreign language learning and applying strategies is a means of transportation for promoting superior achievement. Many researchers believed that a strategy is considered to be efficient if it provides positive support to the learners in their attempts to learn or use the foreign language environments (Bonner and Holliday, 2006; Kiliçkaya and Çokal, 2009; Tsai, 2009).

As this particular study focused especially on note taking strategy, the researchers review the related literature in applying this language learning strategy. Manifold research studies have been conducted on note taking language learning strategy. Most of them focused on the structure and instruction of note taking strategy (Beecher, 1988). Studies considered that note taking has two functions; encoding function that help learners to understand the text or lecture and external function that refers to reviewing note later for better performance in the exam (Gordon and Courtney, 1991; Bonner and Holliday, 2006).

Van Meter *et al.* (1994) stated that most learners took notes when listening to the lectures in universities and colleges. In their ethnographic interview study, they asked college learners why they needed to take notes and asked what they achieved by this. The answers given by the learners were as in the following: (1) it increases their attention to the lecture, (2) it increases their understanding of the lecture content and helps them retain this content later in their memory, (3) it provides a connection between ideas (4) it informs the specific points repeated in a class. In their study, they also focused on the learning strategies that the learners used while taking notes.

They found that the learners generally wrote down the key words in the lectures, paid attention to the content on the board and to the main points and information that they were unfamiliar. Tsai (2009) did a pilot study and analyzed the process that an Arabic speaking student went through while listening to academic lectures at a U.S university. The result of the study indicated that the student wrote simple sentences about the points that the instructor stated. These research studies showed that language learners frequently use the note-taking strategy for different purposes while

listening to lectures. Research studies in second and foreign language field of study showed contrasting results between applying note taking language learning strategy and learners' performance and achievement (Kiewra, 1987; Benton *et al.*, 1993; Kiliçkaya and Çokal, 2009; Tsai, 2009). Recently, most of the researchers stated that note taking strategies could help learners in their process of learning second or foreign languages. Kiliçkaya and Çokal (2009) investigated the effect of note-taking on university learners listening comprehension of lectures. They stated that learners who were allowed to take notes had the opportunity to demonstrate their higher levels of performance without relying heavily on their memories to store all kinds of information heard in lectures. Nevertheless, they ignored the effects of gender in their research. Haghverdi *et al.* (2010) worked on the effect of note taking strategies on academic achievements. The results indicated that note taking strategies improve students' academic achievements.

Unfortunately, in Iranian EFL contexts there is no special note taking training course in high schools or even in universities. Even though different techniques are taught and practiced in universities for understanding lectures, few learners are taught note taking strategy and they just use their experiences in note taking. There is no clear evidence that show the effects of explicit strategy training on learners' performances in listening comprehension test in Iranian EFL context; therefore, this particular study investigated the effects of explicit note taking training (in a strategy-based instruction curriculum) on learners' performance in listening comprehension tests. The major issue to be addressed in this quasi-experimental study includes the following research questions:

Q1: Does not taking training strategy have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' performance in listening comprehension tests?

Q2: Does note taking training have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' attitudes about this strategy?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

Sixty Iranian EFL learners were selected to conduct the present study. All of them studied English at tertiary level. Participants were informed about the study from the beginning, and that they could withdraw their contributions at any time without penalty. All participants were provided with written information about the nature and purpose of the research project at the outset of the study. All of them were insured that the identity of them to the survey would be held in strict confidence. The participants (thirty males, thirty females) divided into two groups (experimental and control group). Their ages were from 19 to 28 years of age. They enrolled in English movies translation courses. In this course, they were taught how to write different movie scripts and how to translate them into Persian. Distinguished features of this study are that the number of male and female participants is equal and all participants are at the same level of proficiency. Participants learned how to use Cornell method while listen to a movie or lecture.

3.2. Instrumentations

A series of instruments was employed to collect the required data for the purpose of this study:

3.2.1. Longman Listening Test

A listening test as pretest and posttest were administered to the participants. The tests were developed from the book, Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL test: Skills and Strategies (Philips, 1996). Five short lectures chose from Deborah Philips's book that followed with four questions. The total numbers of the questions were twenty.

3.2.2. Note Taking Questionnaire

A researchers-made note taking questionnaire that was a modified version of Haghverdi *et al.* (2010) was employed in this study. This questionnaire included fifteen questions that determined the attitude of participants about note taking and its effect on listening comprehension. Three experts reviewed it for its content validity and reliability. The final version of the questionnaire was consisted of 15 Likert-scale items. Then, this researcher-made questionnaire was piloted with 30 learners of the similar participants. Cronbach's Alpha formula for the inventory was employed; the results showed a reliability index of 0.81 ($r = 0.81$).

3.2.3. Semi-Structured Interview

We conducted a semi-structured interview with four participants to investigate in-depth information about note taking strategy. In the face-to-face interviews that were conducted in 30 minutes, we began with lines of questioning and allowed the participants to address other related topics if they liked.

3.2.4. Cornell Method

With this method, different parts of the notebook page have different functions. Notes are recorded on one half, key words and concepts are recorded in another area called the recall column, and a summary is recorded at the bottom of the page. This method has some advantages such as more organized notes, quick identification of key words and concepts, effective study guide for exams, aesthetic arrangement of information, and easy scanning. In this method, students should divide the paper, use loose-leaf notebook paper, and write on one side of the page only. The procedure is as follows; Divide the paper vertically by drawing a line from top to bottom about 2 from the left side of the page. Write the date and page number at the top of each page. During the lecture or listening activities, record the main ideas and concepts on the right side of the page. This is the notes column. Rephrase the information in your own words before writing it down. Skip one line between ideas and several lines between topics. Avoid writing in complete sentences; use symbols and abbreviations. As soon as possible, review the notes in the right column and clarify any ambiguous information. Compare the information of your text with other students' notes. Then pull the main ideas, concepts, terms, places, dates, and names from the right column and record

them in the left-hand recall column. Prepare a summary of the lecture material and record it at the end of the notes. The summary may be in sentences or short phrases. Use both sections of the notes to prepare for exams (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

3.3. Procedures

Sixty students chose purposefully; thirty male learners and thirty female learners. They divided into two classrooms (control group and experimental group); each with fifteen male learners and fifteen female learners. Before starting the term, to elicit learners' attitudes towards note taking strategy, the researchers administered note taking questionnaire. Then, Longman Listening Test was administered as pretest to all participants and its results were recorded for final judgment. The experimental group was taught how to take note based on *Cornell method*. According to Pauk (2001) in Cornell Method, a loose-leaf notebook is recommended to allow one to insert handouts into his or her notes. A vertical line is drawn down the notebook about two inches from the left margin. Only one side of the page is used. A formal outline is avoided, but a style appropriate to the lecturer's style may be used. The note-taker should use short telegraphic sentences and phrases. Most things should be phrased in one's own words. The left hand column is used as a recall column. The students should edit their notes, write keywords or questions in the margin, and use these keywords as a study aid to test their knowledge. Information is summarized at the bottom of the page. Six steps of the Cornell Method are Recording, Reducing, Reciting, Reflecting, Reviewing and recapitulating (Kobayashi, 2006). After taking notes, they are allowed to review their notes and also to compare them with other participants. Comparison of the notes is allowed just within the groups.

During four weeks, learners in the experimental group listened to listening activities and practiced how to make note based on Cornell method, four days in the four weeks and one hour in each day, while the control group was a traditional listening class. After treatment, Longman Listening Test was administered as posttest. After posttest, to investigate the learners' attitude alteration towards note taking strategy, we administered note taking questionnaire again. Finally, they conducted a semi-structured interview with four participants to investigate in-depth information about note taking strategy.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having collected the required data based on the mentioned data collection instruments and procedures, we conducted data analysis and tested the hypotheses formulated for the present study.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the listening comprehension test scores for experimental and control groups (Pallant, 2007). This test was administered as pretest. There was no significant difference in scores for the experimental group ($M=13.93$, $SD= 1.25$) and the control group, $M= 13.80$, $SD= 1.34$; $t(58) = .396$, $p= .694$ (two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference =.133, 95% CL: -.541 to .807) was very small (eta squared = .002). As the results of pretest indicate, there is no statistically significant difference

between experimental and control groups with regard to general listening comprehension ability which confirms the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study.

To investigate the effect of the study treatment, the participants' reading comprehension ability was assessed in posttests via t-test analysis. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the listening comprehension test scores for experimental and control groups. This test was administered as posttest. There was a significant difference in scores for the experimental group ($M=16.23$, $SD=2.14$) and the control group, $M=14.20$, $SD=1.88$; $t(58) = 3.90$, $p=.000$ (two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference =2.033, 95% CL: -.990 to 3.076) was very large effect (eta squared = .207). As the results of posttest indicate, there is statistically a significant difference between experimental and control groups with regard to general listening comprehension ability. This difference indicates that the participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group revealing the effect of note taking training on listening comprehension test performance.

To investigate the attitudes of learners about note taking strategy and the effects of note taking training on their listening comprehension performance, we administered note taking questionnaire at the outset of the study and at the end of it as well. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to investigate the impact of note taking training on the learners' attitudes about teaching strategy. There was a statically significant increase in numbers from Time 1 ($M=47.27$, $SD=3.85$) to Time 2 ($M=64.73$, $SD=5.80$, $t(29)=68.66$, $p=.000$). The mean increase in questionnaire answers was 48.26 with a 95% confidence interval, ranging from 46.83 to 49.70. The eta squared statistic (.98) indicated a large effect size. The results indicate that note taking training has significant impact on learners' attitudes about note taking strategy and its use in the classroom.

To verify the results of the questionnaire and to shed light on the latent factors in such impact, we interviewed with four students at two times; at the outset and at the end of the study. The interview' outline was semi-structured in that we had a list of topics and warm-up questions, but the participants were free to address other related topics if they liked. The procedure for analyzing qualitative data was as follows: Each data set was read several times to gain some sense of the main ideas being expressed. Then, the data were coded and analyzed manually and subjectively.

However, at the outset of the study, the interviewees had a clear definition of note taking strategy. They had diverse attitudes about the impact of it on language development, particularly on listening skills. "Learning strategies are some educational tools that are useful for better learning in any language context; however, it is not inevitable that learning strategies, specially note taking strategy have a significant effect on language improvement", a participant declared in the interview section. The common points in their opinions were as follows: note taking strategy is more useful in reading comprehension and writing tests; applying learning strategy do not doom to learners' success; factors such as teacher, materials, environment, and language context are more important than learning strategy in skill development. Nevertheless, none of them denied the advantages of learning strategies in language classrooms.

The researchers taught the participants how to take note based on Cornell method. The

participants practiced taking notes in a four-week term. To determine the impacts of note taking training on their attitudes, the researchers interviewed them again at the end of the term. After the term, a participant stated that,

It was a wonderful term. Before that, I had overlooked the large impact of note taking strategy in listening comprehension. Note taking training gives me a clear instruction to listening classroom activities. Listening activities were more understandable. This strategy decreases my problem and increases my attention to the task.

The results of qualitative data indicate a major alteration in participants' attitudes toward applying learning strategies in language classrooms. The results indicated that both comprehension and memory on subject matters are enhanced when notes are reviewed. Note taking strategy such as Cornell method shape learners' listening patterns. Practicing such strategy, learners learn how to listen effectively and purposefully. Significant improvement in listening comprehension is an evident advantage of note taking strategy. Teachers play a central role in teaching listening and note-taking strategy in classrooms. They can increase students' motivation in utilizing these strategies in the process of language learning and teaching. Lack of knowledge about learning strategies is a major problem in classrooms. If learners were taught how to employ learning strategy, they would use them in their learning. The learners in this study stated that when learners in the classroom use similar learning strategy, they could help each other more effectively. In such circumstances, cooperative learning will be more effective than other kinds of language learning; determining learners' weak point and their strength will be easier; and teaching will be more meaningful. The value of note-taking training in listening comprehension entitles for appropriate strategies to teach EFL learners how to take effective, meaningful notes within existent time constraints; how to listen to listening activities; which parts of listening activities are more important than the others; and where are major leads in listening activities.

Note takers, as listeners, should understand information and follow them. As writers, note takers should decide on the information to record and arrange it in ways that differ from the original material. They should utilize abbreviating operations, syntactical short cuts, paraphrasing statements, and often a physical formatting of the notes that differs from the linear text of the original material. Such processing provides the opportunity for the learners to store the materials in their short-term memory. As learners, note takers try to store information in long-term memory by writing them down. Therefore, when note takers produce this kind of written product, they activate their cognitive analysis to specify the processes, knowledge, and working memory (Chamot, 2004; Piolat *et al.*, 2005; Stefanou *et al.*, 2008). The point here is that the issue of strategy training would be feasible by making links between learners' experience and broader, potential applications of this work, their engaging in a complex web of ideas incorporating experience, knowledge, practice, and reflection. In such circumstances, learners broad their learning strategies, improve their cooperative tasks, and consequently enhance effective learning.

5. CONCLUSION

Strategies-based instruction (SBI) is a learner-focused approach to language teaching that explicitly joins learners' strategy with educational tasks with everyday classroom language instruction (Oxford, 1990). SBI provides learners the opportunity to understand not only what they can learn in their language classrooms, but also how they can learn the language they are studying. Conventionally, it was considered that if L2 teachers did their jobs well, learners would learn and retain the language effectively. It has become clear, however, that if learners are not taking responsibility for their own language learning or are not motivated to learn, it may not matter how well the teachers teach in their classrooms.

The current study broadly investigated of the effects of strategy-based instruction, particularly explicit strategy training on language learning achievement; to do so, this study investigated the effects of explicit note-taking training on the learner's performance on listening comprehension tests. To reach this aim, the researchers taught the thirty participants of experimental group how to apply Cornell method in listening comprehension. This study produced results, which corroborated the findings of a great deal of the previous research studies in this field. The obtained results demonstrated that strategy-based instruction has significant effects on performance of EFL learners' in listening comprehension tests. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Tsai (2009) who found that reviewing notes enhances long-term memory, as well as yielding more mature ideas and meaningful experiences in relation to the subject material. There are similarities between the attitudes expressed in this study that found teaching strategies engage learners in learning tasks more deeply and strengthen their understanding.

The results of the interviews indicated that lack of knowledge; especially on the part of teachers is the major problem in Iranian EFL learning contexts. Teachers' knowledge to establish a strategy-based instruction is limited or even they don't believe in such practical teaching platform. On the other hand, learners do not know how to apply learning strategies in and outside of the classrooms. The obtained results highlighted the advantages of note taking training as follows: It provides more learning opportunities for language learners; eliminates learners' difficulty during listening activities; leads learners to a tenacious structure in their classrooms' tasks; makes a homogenous class; and therefore, learners would be able to determine their own and their classmates' weak points and strengths. A teacher in a homogenous classroom has more effective teaching than in a diverse classroom. Teachers also should teach learners how to learn and think independently through explicit strategy training. The results highlighted the central role of teacher in strategy training and subsequent strategy practices. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have suggested a sequence of following steps to conducting SBI:

- Diagnosis: Identifying and assessing learners' learning styles and the learning strategies that fit them through observation, interviews, questionnaires, diaries, and so on.
- Preparation/Awareness-Raising: Developing learners' awareness of different strategies; explaining the significances of learning strategies; explicit strategy training.
- Instruction: Providing different practice opportunities with varied learning tasks or content.

- Evaluation: Helping learners evaluate their own strategy use; evaluating strategy training procedures and revising the adequate training components.

Teachers in the interviews stated that the first step in applying strategy-based instruction is identification of learners' learning styles and selection of appropriate learning strategies that fit them. These findings can be generalizable to other language learning strategies and leads teachers, curriculum designers, and teacher trainers how to plan lessons more effectively and to develop teachers purposefully.

Learning strategy is a tool for language learners to handle their learning difficulties; therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to provide opportunities to acquire such learning tools. The present study should be replicated based on other language learning strategies to enhance and deepen teachers and learners' understanding towards the significance of strategy-based instruction in language classrooms.

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