

## Iranian EFL and Malaysian ESL University Students' Use of Language Learning Strategies

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### Abstract

In recent years, more active roles have been allocated to language learners. Empowering students can help them function more autonomously, and their ability to make appropriate use of language learner strategies (LLSs) predisposes them to achieve their academic goals. The present study's participants were male and female undergraduate university students from two different countries. A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to compare the use of the six strategy categories of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies together with direct strategies, indirect strategies, and overall use of language learning strategies among Iranian EFL and Malaysian ESL university students. It was illuminated that social context influenced students' use of social strategies. Classroom observations helped the researchers to find out about the frequency of language learning strategies use. Metacognitive and cognitive strategies were the most frequently used in-class strategies among Iranian and Malaysian university students. It is suggested that instructors provide a wide range of language learning strategies to satisfy the needs of learners with different needs and expectations.

**Keywords:** language learning strategies; mixed method; social context; university students

### Introduction

Language learners are no longer regarded as passive recipients of instruction since they are expected to take on active roles in language

learning. Thus, learners need to make appropriate use of language learning strategies. Learners with the ability to make good use of language learning strategies are more predisposed to succeed (Mulyani, 2020; Simsek, A. & Balaban, 2010). Motivated learners usually employ more strategies than less motivated learners Shi (2017). Successful and unsuccessful learners use strategies differently, and successful learners usually use more strategies.

Successful language learners constantly use a greater variety of LLSs (Ang, S., Embi, M. A., & Yunus, 2017; Nazri, N. M., Yunus, M. M., Nazri,

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N. D., 2015; Rubaai, N., & Hashim, 2019). According to Nam and Oxford (1998), unsuccessful learners do not use fewer learning strategies than their more successful counterparts; rather, they use strategies in a haphazard fashion and in a way unrelated to their learning style. Embi (1996) enumerated different characteristics of successful vs. unsuccessful learners. Learning strategies are choices the learners make while learning or using a second language Cook (1991), which can influence learning. They are foundations from which all learning investments, plans, processes, goals, and objectives will emerge Dublin (2011). Tarone (1981), cited in Mahmood & Murad (2018)) considers language learning strategy in a broader frame, including the linguistic and metalinguistic skills in the L2, which are followed in developing the interlanguage competence of the learner.

Different researchers have provided different classifications of language learning strategies. Some of these classifications are more popular than others, while some seem to enjoy less popularity. Language learning strategies can be categorized as cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective O'Malley, J.M., & Chamot (1990). According to O'Malley and Chamot, metacognitive strategies had an executive function and involved planning one's learning, monitoring, and evaluating the success of a learning task. These strategies include self-evaluation, which incorporates the assessment of one's linguistic and communicative competence, together with self-management, which helps learners to become aware of the conditions promoting learning and creating those conditions. They affirmed that cognitive strategies included the

direct analysis and manipulation of language input and encompassed strategies such as imitating a language model, remembering a target item by choosing an L1 word, which is acoustically similar to the new word, and making mental images linking it with the new word (keyword) and using all available sources of information to guess the meaning of unknown items and fill in missing parts (inferencing). Social/affective strategies, however, deal with all the interactions with other learners and native speakers and management of the affective demands made by language learning. Cooperation, questioning for clarification, and self-talk are examples of social/affective strategies.

On the other hand, Rubin (1987) classified LLSs into three types of strategies used by learners that contribute directly or indirectly to learning. These are learning strategies, communicative strategies, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies mandate thinking about the learning process as it is going on, planning for learning, and evaluating learning Hismanoglu (2000), while cognitive strategies are more restricted to specific learning tasks and include more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Finally, socio-affective strategies are related to social-mediating activity and transacting with others.

Oxford (1990)classified language learning strategies into 'memory strategies', 'cognitive strategies', 'compensation strategies', 'metacognitive strategies', 'affective strategies', and 'social strategies. She considers the first three as 'direct learning strategies, and the rest are regarded as 'indirect learning strategies'.

According to Oxford (1994), the strategies can be divided into two types: direct learning

and indirect learning strategies. Direct learning strategies directly involve the target language. In contrast, indirect learning strategies pave the way for language learners without directly involving the target language. Her classification

paved the way for many researchers and has been frequently used by different researchers and investigators. Tables 1 and 2 tabulate Oxford's classification of direct and indirect strategies.

**Table 1**  
*Oxford's 1990 Direct Strategies Classification System*

Memory Strategies	Creating Mental Linkages
	Applying images and sounds
	Reviewing well
	Employing action
Cognitive Strategies	Practicing
	Receiving and sending messages
	Analyzing and reasoning
Compensation Strategies	Guessing intelligently
	Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing

**Table 2**  
*Oxford's 1990 Indirect Strategies Classification System*

Strategy	Classification
Metacognitive Strategies	Centering your learning
	Arranging and planning your learning
	Evaluating your learning
Affective Strategies	Lowering your anxiety
	Encouraging yourself
	Taking your emotional temperature
Social Strategies	Asking questions
	Cooperating with others
	Empathizing with others

Analysis of the specific strategies used by students of any of the two countries can also be informative. Specific patterns of strategy use among students of each country may be identified. For example, there may be specific strategies used by Iranian students and not by

Malaysian students. Likewise, some special strategies may be used by Malaysian students, not Iranian students. Instructors and practitioners in each country can obtain a more profound and clearer picture of the strategies used. Furthermore, comparisons can be made

on the use of strategies among students of different contexts, and students of each context can be encouraged to use the effective strategies which students of the other learning context may use.

Evidence of the use of strategies in different ESL/EFL contexts can be revealing. A comparison of the types of strategies used by students of different social contexts and the frequency with which they use memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies can show the preference and priorities of university students in various societies. This information can help practitioners know more about the scope of strategy use and help their students use the strategies in a direction that brings about the most promising educational outcomes. Knowing how to use the appropriate strategy is one of the pre-conditions of successful learning and provides greater autonomy Teow Ghee, (2010). By investigating the LLSs use among students, Iranian and Malaysian language teaching practitioners can identify the aspects of LLSs that require more strategy training. If strategies used by students of different countries are examined, more insights could be gained into the characteristics of learners from different backgrounds.

The main research questions of this study are as follows:

1. Is there a difference in language learning strategies among Iranian and Malaysian students?
2. What types of classroom language learning strategies were used by Iranian and Malaysian students in the observations?

## Method

The mixed method blends the elements of both quantitative research with those of qualitative research. The study participants comprised male and female university students from two different countries. This study encompassed students of English Literature studying at the School of Language and Linguistics at Shiraz University, Iran, and the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, University of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia, which are both public universities.

All participants were undergraduate students and differed concerning social context. A total of 159 students were involved in the main phase of this study. When the SILL questionnaire was given to students, 155 students (91 Iranian students and 64 Malaysian students) answered it and returned it to the researchers, while four students (two Iranians and two Malaysians) did not return the questionnaires. The necessary data were collected via two instruments: The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and classroom observations.

A cluster sampling was used. The entire population of interest was divided into groups or clusters. Then, a random sample of these clusters was selected. Each cluster must be mutually exclusive, and the clusters must include the entire population. Since all the units within a cluster were selected, the sampling procedure in this study was one-stage cluster sampling. This sampling procedure offers three main advantages: feasibility, economy, and reduced variability.

As undergraduates of English Literature from Shiraz University and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia were involved in this study, the entire population was divided into clusters of first-year students, sophomores, and juniors. Cluster sampling was used, and one class was chosen from students of the first year, one from the second year, and one from the third year, both in Iran and Malaysia. The questionnaire and observations were all conducted in the selected classes. For the observations, all the students of the selected classes were involved, and whatever went on was recorded by a video camera that the researcher installed in the classes.

The main instrument is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), one of the most frequently used language learning strategy inventories worldwide. It was devised by Oxford (1990) and consisted of 50 items. As Green and Oxford (1995) have maintained, studies using SILL have involved around 8000 students in various parts of the world. Many researchers have found this questionnaire useful and thus used the questionnaire in their studies.

The reliability of the questionnaire was established via Cronbach's alpha and was 0.93 for Iranian students, 0.91 for Malaysian students, and 0.92 for all students. To check the validity, the authors gave it to several professors and experts in the field. Another method to increase rigor in this research was triangulation; questionnaires and observations were performed in different settings.

## Findings and Discussion

### Findings

Multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was applied to analyze the differences between groups on the different variables. The effects of the independent variable, social context, were examined on the six dependent variables. A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to compare the use of the six strategy categories of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies together with direct strategies, indirect strategies, and overall use of language learning strategies among Iranian EFL and Malaysian ESL university students.

Box's test of equality of covariance, which served to test the null hypothesis, showed that the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables were equal across groups. The test results were not statistically significant for the dependent variables of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies ( $F = .986, p = .477 > .05$ ). This result suggested equal-error variance and co-variance matrices for the dependent variables of the study. Thus, parametric tests were applied to analyze the group differences among university students of different social contexts (Iranian EFL vs. Malaysian ESL students) for the six categories of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (see Table 3).

**Table 3**  
*Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices Students with Different Social Contexts*

Box's M	F	DF1	DF2	Sig
21.647	.986	21	67569.125	.477

Levene's test of equality of error variance, which was a precondition for the parametric test of multiple analysis of variance, was not statistically significant. However, there were equal error variances between groups. Data obtained for university students of different social contexts revealed that the error variance of dependent variables of memory strategies,

cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies was equal across groups, and the assumptions of homogeneity of error variances were not violated among groups. Table 4 below shows the results of Levene's test of equality of variance for students of different social contexts.

**Table 4**  
*Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances*

	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Memory Strategies	1.937	1	153	.166
Cognitive Strategies	3.620	1	153	.059
Compensation Strategies	4.400	1	153	.051
Metacognitive Strategies	2.403	1	153	.123
Affective Strategies	.743	1	153	.390
Social Strategies	1.814	1	153	.180

Descriptive statistics, which are usually applied for tabulating and summarizing data, were used for calculating the means and standard deviations of university students of different social contexts (Iranian EFL and Malaysian ESL) on their use of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. As a result, Iranian university students obtained a higher vector of means for memory, metacognitive, and effective strategies. Moreover, Malaysian students obtained a higher vector of means for

cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and social strategies. The results related to the means and standard Deviations of students with different social contexts are displayed in Table 5.

One or two of the MANOVA pre-conditions should be met to enable the researchers to perform the multiple analysis of variance. In this study, not only Box's M test pre-condition but also Levene's Test pre-condition had satisfactory results (both were not significant). These results permitted the use of the parametric test of MANOVA. The multivariate

test of mixed-group design (group  $\times$  measures) was conducted to determine the effect of social context (EFL vs. ESL) on using the six strategy categories of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Wilks' lambda is usually used in multivariate analysis of variance to test whether or not there are differences between the means of specific groups of subjects on a combination of dependent variables, and it

plays the same function as the F-test in ANOVA. Findings from the multivariate test of Wilk's Lambda yielded a very significant result with Wilks' Lambda equal to 0.859,  $F(6, 148) = 4.063$ ,  $p = .001$ , and  $\eta^2 = .141$  and for the six strategy inventory of memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive and affective strategies. Table 6 depicts the results of the multivariate test.

**Table 5**  
*The Means and Standard Deviations of Students  
with Different Social Contexts for the 6 Strategy Categories*

Dependent Variable	Ethnicity	Mean	SD
Memory Strategies	Iranian (EFL)	3.1233	.61541
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.0521	.54719
Cognitive Strategies	Iranian (EFL)	3.3273	.58156
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.4576	.50326
Compensation Strategies	Iranian (EFL)	3.2582	.66725
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.2760	.55573
Metacognitive Strategies	Iranian (EFL)	3.7961	.74116
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.7639	.61131
Affective Strategies	Iranian (EFL)	3.0952	.80590
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.0911	.75003
Social Strategies	Iranian (EFL)	3.2564	.79633
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.6432	.69950

**Table 6**  
*Multivariate Test for the Six Strategy Categories by Social Context*

Effect	Value	F	Hypo df	Err df	Sig	Par Sq	Eta	Power
Context	Wilk's Lambda	.859	4.063	6	148	0.001	.141	.971

Univariate analysis of variance was conducted to examine the effects of dependent variables of memory, cognitive, compensation,

metacognitive, affective, and social strategies used. When Iranian and Malaysian university students were compared, it was found that

Iranian students used memory strategies (M=3.123, SD=.615), metacognitive strategies (M=3.796, SD=.741), and affective strategies (M=3.095, SD=.750) more than Malaysian students. However, Malaysian students used cognitive strategies (M= 3.457, SD= .503.), compensation strategies (M=3.276, SD=.555), and social strategies (M=3.643, SD=.699) more

than Iranian students. As the interpretations of multivariate results depend on the interpretation of significant univariate effects, significant univariate effects should be dealt with great care. In addition, the findings showed that social context's main effects on social strategies were significant (F [1, 153] = 9.786, p= .002 <.05). Table 7 shows the results.

**Table 7**  
*Univariate Analysis (Tests of Between-Subjects Effects)*

Source	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Memory Strategies	.191	1	.551	.551	.459
Cognitive Strategies	.638	1	2.103	2.103	.149
Compensation Strategies	.012	1	.031	.031	.861
Metacognitive Strategies	.039	1	.082	.082	.775
Affective Strategies	.001	1	.001	.001	.974
Social Strategies	5.622	1	9.786	9.786	.002

Levene's test of homogeneity of variance was not statistically significant for the dependent variables of direct strategies, indirect strategies, and overall use of language learning strategies. The findings of Levene's test checked the homogeneity-of-co-variance-matrices of the study's dependent variables. These results allowed the multiple analysis of variance to analyze the group differences among Malaysian and Iranian students, considering their use of direct and indirect strategies and overall language learning strategies. It yielded the F [1, 153] = 4.185, p=.051>.05 for direct strategies, F [1, 153] = .2023, p=.157>.05 for indirect strategies and F [1, 153] = 3.650, p=.058>.05 for overall use of language learning strategies.

To render quantitative data in a tangible and manageable form, the authors used

descriptive statistics for students with different social contexts using direct and indirect strategies and language learning strategies. The calculation of the vector of means and standard deviations of the students of different groups (Iranian EFL students vs. Malaysian ESL students) revealed that Malaysian university students obtained a higher mean in direct and indirect strategies and overall language learning strategies. Table 8 reveals the results.

A multivariate test of mixed-group design (group × measures) was conducted to determine the effect of social context (an independent variable) on direct strategy, indirect strategy, and overall use of language learning strategies (dependent variables). The multivariate Wilk's Lambda

test was performed on the data at a 0.05 level of significance. Table 9 shows the detailed results. Findings from the multivariate test of Wilk's Lambda for students of different social contexts

(Iranian versus Malaysian) upheld an insignificant Wilks'  $\Lambda = .994$ ,  $F(2, 152) = .443$ ,  $p = 0.643$ , and  $\eta^2 = .006$  for direct strategies, indirect strategies and overall use of strategies.

**Table 8**

*The Means and standard deviations of Students with Different Social Context by Direct Strategies, Indirect Strategies, and Overall LLSs*

Dependent Variable	Social Context	Mean	SD
Direct St.	Iranian (EFL)	3.2497	.51057
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.2942	.51057
Indirect St.	Iranian (EFL)	3.4417	.65145
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.5372	.57328
Overall St.	Iranian (EFL)	3.3303	.52491
	Malaysian (ESL)	3.3963	.42204

**Table 9**

*Multivariate Test for Direct Strategies, Indirect Strategies and Overall LLSs by Social Context*

Effect	Value	F	Hypo df	Err df	Sig	Par Eta Sq	Power	
Social Context	Wilk's Lambda	.994	.443	2	152	.643	.006	.121

Malaysian university students (when compared with Iranian students) revealed a higher use of direct strategies ( $M=3.294$ ,  $SD=.5107$ ), higher use of indirect strategies ( $M=3.357$ ,  $SD=.573$ ), and a higher mean for the overall use of language learning strategies ( $M=3.396$ ,  $SD=.422$ ). The authors conducted a univariate analysis to identify the effects of dependent variables of direct strategies, indirect strategies, and overall use of language learning strategies, as

depicted in Table 10. The findings showed that social context did not significantly affect direct ( $F[1, 153] = .331$ ,  $p = .566$ ,  $\eta^2 = .002$ ) and indirect strategies ( $F[1, 153] = .891$ ,  $p = .347$ ,  $\eta^2 = .006$ ). In addition, the overall use of language learning strategies was not significant ( $F[1, 153] = .694$ ,  $p = .406$ ,  $\eta^2 = .005$ ). In other words, social context did not influence the use of direct, indirect, or overall LLSs among Iranian and Malaysian students.

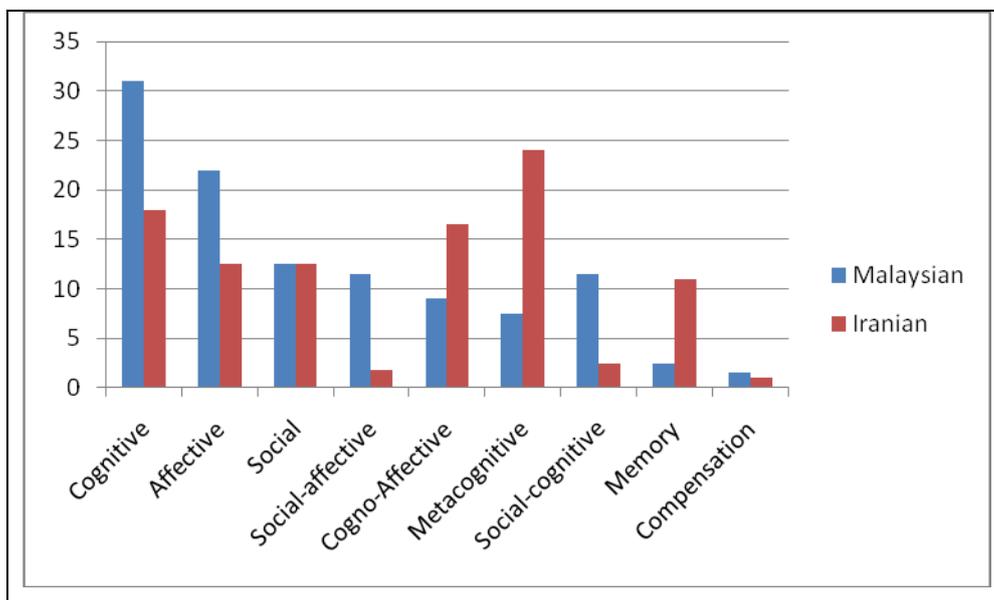
**Table 10**  
*Univariate Analysis (Tests of Between-Subjects Effects)*

Source	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Direct Strategies	.074	1	.074	.331	.566
Indirect Strategies	.343	1	.343	.891	.347
LLSs	.163	1	.163	.694	.406

Classroom observations helped the researchers determine the frequency of language learning strategies, and the most and least used classroom language learning strategies were identified for Iranian and Malaysian students. As shown by the analysis of

observations, the least used classroom language learning strategies were the compensation strategies. Figure 1 compares in-class language learning strategies among Iranian and Malaysian students.

**Figure 1**  
*A Comparison of Classroom Strategy Use among Iranians and Malaysians*



Iranian students used metacognitive strategies more than cognitive strategies, cogno-affective strategies, social strategies, affective strategies, memory strategies, social-cognitive strategies, social-affective strategies,

and compensation strategies in the classrooms. They also used compensation strategies less than any other kind of strategy. However, Malaysian students used cognitive and metacognitive strategies more than any other

kind of language learning strategies and compensation strategies less than other kinds of strategies in the classroom.

### Discussion

The findings showed that social context had a significant effect on social strategies use ( $F [1, 153] = 9.786, p = .002 < .05$ ). In other words, Malaysian social context affected the participants' use of social strategies. Levene's test of homogeneity of variance was not statistically significant for the dependent variables of direct strategies, indirect strategies, and overall use of language learning strategies. It yielded the  $F [1, 153] = 4.185, p = .051 > .05$  for direct strategies,  $F [1, 153] = 2.023, p = .157 > .05$  for indirect strategies and  $F [1, 153] = 3.650, p = .058 > .05$  for overall use of language learning strategies.

The calculation of means and standard deviations of the students of different groups (Iranian students vs. Malaysian students) revealed that Malaysian university students obtained a higher mean for direct and indirect strategies and overall language learning strategies. The findings showed that social context did not significantly affect direct strategies ( $F [1, 153] = .331, p = .566, \eta^2 = .002$ ), indirect strategies ( $F [1, 153] = .891, p = .347, \eta^2 = .006$ ), and overall use of language learning strategies ( $F [1, 153] = .694, p = .406, \eta^2 = .005$ ).

Similarly, f Mohd. Nazali Abu Bakr et al.'s (1999) study showed significant relationships between the use of language learning strategies and the subjects' language performance and social context. Wharton's (2000) observation in Singapore also revealed that the kind of learners and the context of learning played a role in the choice of learners' strategies.

Moreover, the findings of the present study support Wharton's (2000) observations in which he found that the types of strategies used depended on the kind of learners and the setting in which learning occurs. Yang (2007) also found that ethnicity and social context did play a significant role in the selection of language learning strategies. According to Rubin (1987), social strategies are activities in which learners are exposed to opportunities that can be of great help in practicing their knowledge, and these strategies can offer great exposure to the target language. As Malaysian students live in an ESL context, this opportunity (the chance of being exposed to the target language) may be provided more frequently than Iranian students. This fact can explain why Malaysian students used social strategies at a significantly higher rate than Iranian students. The frequent use of Metacognitive strategies among Iranian and Malaysian students, as revealed from observations, is similar to that of other Asian countries such as Japan, China, Korea, Palestine, and Taiwan, as reported in studies by Hanafiah et al., (2021); Wafa Abu Shmais (2003); and Oxford et al., (1990). Frequent use of metacognitive strategies is important in ESL/EFL learning, for they are the higher order executive skills that include planning, evaluating, and monitoring learning activities.

### Conclusion

Effective strategies are highly important as they are likely to influence language achievement. It can also motivate students to learn more Rahimi et al. (2008) since there is a strong link between the level of motivation and strategy use. Iranians frequently used

metacognitive strategies in the classroom, while Malaysian students applied cognitive strategies to a greater degree. Iranians and Malaysians used compensation strategies less than any other strategies, and they were the least used in the classroom. It can be suggested that Iranian and Malaysian instructors should teach their students about the details of compensation strategies and encourage students to use them more in the classroom. These strategies can help Iranian and Malaysian students communicate despite their gaps and limitations in language knowledge. The students should be provided with sufficient information and techniques to use these strategies effectively.

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