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The relationship among socio-affective language learning strategies, EFL intermediate learners' language anxiety, and Their Listening Skill

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship among socio-affective language learning strategies, EFL Intermediate learners' language anxiety, and their listening skill. In order to do so, 138 learners took part in this study. These participants were homogenized on the basis of an Oxford Placement Test (OPT), and 103 participants whose scores were between 51 and 60 were chosen as the main intermediate participants of this study. The other instruments were Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986), Socio-Affective Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SASILL) developed by Oxford

(1990), and the listening section of the PET. Analyses of the data revealed that there was a statistically significant negative correlation between socio-affective language learning strategies and EFL learners' anxiety ($r=-0.65$, $p=0.00$). The results indicated that there was a statistically significant positive relationship among socio-affective language learning strategies and listening skill of EFL learners ($r=0.69$, $p\text{-value}=0.00$). The implication of this study is that teachers and learners can better understand the situation of EFL learning.

Keywords: Socio-affective language learning strategies, Language anxiety, Listening skill, Intermediate learners

Introduction

Since 1990s, categorizing and analyzing the strategies that good language learners' use when learning a foreign or second language have been the focus of many researchers (Brown, 2002; Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987) [6, 7, 22, 24, 34]. The 1990s had a turning point in language education as the methods of language teaching lost importance in the field due to the fact that they failed to take into consideration individual learners' needs, different intelligence types, and personal learning styles and strategies. The impact of different language learning strategies and intelligence types on anxiety was thereafter investigated widely. Socio-affective language learning strategies were mostly associated with the anxiety that is aroused while learning and practicing a second or foreign language (Cohen, 1998) [7].

Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) are defined as actions or tactics which successful and self-directed language learners choose to use during their learning process so that they can gain their learning goals more easily, faster, and more enjoyably (Oxford, 1990) [24]. According to Stern (1975) [28], "the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques" (p. 311). All language learners use language learning strategies either consciously or unconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks in the language classroom. Since language classroom is like a problem-solving environment in which language learners are likely to face new input and difficult tasks given by their instructors, learners' attempts to find the quickest or easiest way to do what is required, that is, using language learning strategies is inescapable (Stern, 1975) [28].

Socio-affective language learning strategies are the ones that are non-academic in nature and deal with intriguing learning through setting up a level of empathy between the instructor and learner. They consist of considering factors such as emotions and attitudes (Oxford, 1990) [24]. Socio-affective language learning strategies strongly take into account the learner's relation to society as a whole ranging from family to the global community.

These strategies strongly consider the learner's relation to society as a whole ranging from family to the global community. Among these strategies, socio-affective language learning strategies are considered as the most essential ones in developing learners' skills (Arnold, 1999) [1]. On the other hand, learners who have developed their socio-affective language learning

strategies are likely to become more successful language learners (Hanna, 2012) ^[10]. There are many factors involved when trying to understand what makes a person learn a foreign language successfully (Wenden & Rubin, 1987) ^[32]. However, humanistic language teaching has indicated that affective factors, such as attitudes, motivation, anxiety, and self-esteem, have great influence on the success of language learning since “the way we feel about our capacities and ourselves can either facilitate or impede our learning” (Arnold, 1999, p. 8) ^[11].

In the same research, Baki (2012) ^[4] argued that “if we want our learners to develop their inherent potential to learn, the affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, self-esteem and inhibition and the inner needs of the learners can no longer be neglected” (p. 97). Previously, Oxford (1990) ^[24] had pointed out that “many excellent teachers have learned to do some of this intuitively, but explicit understanding of individual-difference dimensions can enhance the work of all teachers” (p. 188).

Learner strategies are specifically categorized as memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) ^[22, 24]. Socio-affective language learning strategies known as a sub-category of language learning strategies were first mentioned in a longitudinal research that O’Malley and Chamot (1990) ^[22] conducted in a high school. Oxford (1990) ^[24] proposed a broader category of LLSs including social and affective strategies separately under the classification of indirect language learning strategies. In a wider definition, socio-affective language learning strategies are the physical and mental tasks and activities that language learners select consciously to regulate their interactions and emotions with other people during their learning process (Griffiths, 2008; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) ^[22, 24].

Of all the affective variables related to language learning, anxiety is one of the mostly experienced and most powerful emotions in psychology. Anxiety is a common phenomenon that most of the language learners have, though the level of anxiety differs from learner to learner. Learners usually become anxious when they are not the native speaker, but are supposed to use or learn the language. In today’s world, English is regarded as the one of the most dominant language. Thus, the importance of learning English is increasing particularly in a country like Iran in which English is considered as a foreign language and learners learn this language as a necessary course at schools and universities (Azarfam & Baki, 2012) ^[2].

Anxiety can be defined as a mental and physical state characterized by specific emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioral symptoms. It is an adaptive reaction which mobilizes the organism and helps it defend, at tact or avoid an anxiety stimulus. The stimulus can be a previous external or internal antecedent or trigger. To state the definite causes of anxiety can be rather complicated as it is influenced by many factors such as biological, psychological, social or other (Griffiths, 2008) ^[8]. Moreover, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is defined by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) ^[16] as “the distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128).

Concerning the third variable of the study which is listening, studies in the field of teaching have been mainly based on reading, writing and speaking as the skills necessary for

language acquisition. This is because before the 1970’s, listening was taken only as a receptive skill in language learning (Hanna, 2012) ^[10]. Since its role in language learning was taken for granted, listening comprehension has received little research and pedagogical attention. But the early 70’s, increased research in the field brought attention to the role of listening as a tool for understanding and a key factor in facilitating language learning as well as the development of different listening strategies (Vandergrift, 2002) ^[31].

Listening provides people with the greatest amount of input during the process of language acquisition and development (Gur, Dilci, Coskun, & Delican, 2013) ^[9]. Osada (2004) ^[23] argued that listening is in fact vital for the language learning but at the same time a complex process. Due to the amount of effort to acquire to the learners to listen, which must comprehend what it been said, retain the information in memory, integrated with what is being said and continually adjust its understanding of what its heard in the light of prior knowledge and incoming information.

Review of the related literature

Socio-affective language learning strategies are the ones that are non-academic in nature and deal with intriguing learning through setting up a level of empathy between the instructor and learner. They consist of considering factors such as emotions and attitudes (Oxford, 1990).

Unlike O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990) preferred to distinguish between affective and social strategies. Affective strategies consist of three sub-categories which are lowering your anxiety, encouraging yourself, and taking your emotional temperature; moreover; likewise, social strategies cover three learning strategies as asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others, also each category further include various strategies. In addition, Oxford (1990) ^[24] stated that affective strategies are “woefully underused” by many learners (p. 143), and learners who need these strategies most tend to use them least (Hurd, 2008). One reason for this disconnection might be that learners are “not familiar with paying attention to their own feelings and social relationships as part of the L2 learning process” (Oxford, 1990, p. 179) ^[24]. The best way to make learners be aware of the importance of the emotions and social relations in language learning and to demonstrate the ways to deal with negative feelings emerging during language learning process might be socio-affective strategy training.

The importance of anxiety in language classes gained importance in the 1970s with the integration of humanist psychologists’ theories into education (Maslow, 1970; Moskowitz, 1978; Rogers, 1989) ^[20, 21, 25]. Language anxiety is a type of situational anxiety which has effects on state anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) ^[18]. “We can see that a person with a high level of language anxiety will experience state anxiety frequently; a person with a low level of language anxiety will not experience state anxiety very often in the second language context” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 29) ^[19].

Therefore, language anxiety can be regarded as state or situation-specific type of anxiety depending on the level and frequency a person experiences it. Language-specific anxiety is commonly experienced in second or foreign language classrooms in low or high levels, and FLA is mostly preferred name for this type of anxiety.

The term FLA was generated by Horwitz et al. (1986) ^[27] after they worked with a support group of 225 learners from

beginning language classes at the University of Texas. Seventy-eight learners in this group reported having anxiety during their foreign language classes. Two groups of fifteen learners were selected to have group-focused meetings, and their foreign language learning experiences contributed to the formulation of the research instrument, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which has been used worldwide by many researchers to test language EFL learners' anxiety levels. Focused group meetings indicated that FLA existed at least for some aspects of foreign language learning such as "communication apprehension", "test anxiety", and "fear of negative evaluation" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127) ^[27].

On the basis of the effect of language anxiety on language achievement, many researchers (Bailey, 1983; Horwitz & Young, 1991; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Oxford, 1990; Scovel 1991) ^[3, 27, 15, 18, 24, 27] agreed on two types of anxiety: facilitative and debilitating. According to Young (1991) ^[27], "facilitating anxiety is an increase in drive level which results in improved performance while debilitating anxiety is an increase in arousal or drive level which leads to poor performance" (p. 58). In addition, Scovel (1991) ^[27] stated that facilitative anxiety prepares learners emotionally and motivates to tackle new and challenging tasks; however, learners with debilitating anxiety tend to stay away from new learning tasks and adopt avoidance behaviors. As a result, learners need both facilitative and debilitating anxiety because learners must have both caution and motivation when learning new language items.

Vandergrift (2002) ^[31] claims that despite progress in the field, listening is still difficult to describe. What researchers have been able to conclude is that in order to understand aural information, listeners must use effective listening strategies. Such strategies are particularly significant in second language learning; due to the lack of them, learners' listening comprehension becomes problematic, challenging, and ineffective Mendelsohn (1998, as cited in Hanna, 2012) ^[10]. As a result, since the 1980's studies based on strategies used by effective learners have been advising teachers that the main purpose in designing a listening lesson is to "instruct learners how to go about listening, i.e. how to handle information that is not 100% comprehensible" (Mendelsohn, 1998, as cited in Hanna, 2012, p. 2) ^[10].

While learning listening comprehension, learners might encounter several difficulties, Underwood (1989) ^[30] notes learners might be unable to control the speed of the speaker; they can't ask for words to be repeated all the time; their limited knowledge of vocabulary makes listening comprehension difficult; they show some difficulties in recognizing discourse markers; they express difficulties in concentrating in a foreign language; they suffer from a desire to understand the meaning of every word; and they lack contextual knowledge.

Listeners can't control the speed of the speaker. Underwood (1989) ^[30] says, "Many language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension, as opposed to reading comprehension, is that listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks" (p. 16). However, Hayati (2010) ^[12] examines the effect of speech rate on listening comprehension by exposing learners to slow speech rate and natural speech rate and notes that both can be beneficial to the listeners. But the degree of benefit learners gained in natural speech rate leads Hayati to indicate that, for now, naturalness counts more in listening comprehension,

although slow speech rate did permit an improvement in listeners' comprehension.

Although the previous research has been conducted, there have been relative few studies looking at the correlation of socio-affective language learning strategies and FLA (Hamzah, Shamshiri & Noordin, 2009) ^[11], and fewer still that focus on socio-affective language learning strategies and listening skill in particular. Also, with the help of socio-affective language learning strategies, learners will have the chance to learn which tactics can be used to manage their high anxiety, and then evaluate and use those that are most beneficial for them. Also, curriculum developers, textbook writers, and developers of in-class materials can make use of the strategies offered in this research and include them in their curricula, textbooks, and materials. As a result, there exists a significant gap in relation to the relationship among socio affective language learning strategies, learners' anxiety, and listening skill of intermediate learners and this study was an attempt to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between socio-affective language learning strategies and EFL learners' anxiety?

RQ2. Is there any statistically significant relationship between socio-affective language learning strategies and EFL learners' listening skill?

Method

Participants

The main participants of the study were 103 English language learners in Tehran. They were intermediate male learners in adult's department. Their age ranged between 15 and 24 years old.

Instruments

In order to gather the data, four main instruments were used.

Oxford Placement Test (OPT): The OPT is a test of English general proficiency (60 items) which was used as a means of homogenizing the learners regarding their language proficiency level. This sample OPT test is developed by Oxford. According to OPT's band score, those whose scores were between 51 and 60 were selected as intermediate participants.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS): The FLCAS was used to collect data on learners' foreign language anxiety. This scale contained 33 items and was based on a five point Likert-scale and aimed to test three types of anxiety related to foreign language learning, which were communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986). Moreover, Horwitz et al. (1986) calculated the internal reliability of FLCAS, achieving an alpha coefficient of 0.93.

Socio-Affective Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SASILL): The adapted version of Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL), developed by Oxford (1990) ^[24] was administered. The original SILL had 50 items and aimed to investigate each strategy's frequency of use. This questionnaire also had five point Likert-scale and for the present study, the researcher selected only 12 items from the scale that were related only to affective and social strategies. Reliability of the questionnaire was 0.84 using Cronbach alpha.

Listening Skill Test: A listening test based on the listening section of the Preliminary English Test (PET) was used for

the purpose of this study. The test consisted of 25 items in different formats (multiple choice item, fill in the blanks, comprehension questions). Also, the reliability of the test was estimated by Cronbach Alpha and found to be 0.83.

Procedure

To conduct this research, a briefing session was first arranged for the participants who were all homogeneous in terms of proficiency level. The different aspects of the research were elaborated mainly to assure the learners that the results of the study were going to be used just for the research purpose. The researcher further explained that the researcher was going to distribute two questionnaires and two tests. At first, OPT was conducted to 138 participants, and 103 of them whose scores were within the intermediate level were selected. The preliminary explanation took about ten minutes after which the two questionnaires were distributed among

the participants. In the presence of the researcher, the participants answered the questions. At the next step, the listening test was administered. To eliminate the possible sequence effect, the questionnaires and the tests were distributed and administered in no particular order from one class to another although they were done similarly in each class. Both descriptive and inferential statistics (Pearson Correlation Coefficient) were run by SPSS software (Version 22) in order to answer the research questions of the study.

Results

On the whole, 138 participants answered the OPT. The table below shows the OPT score’s frequency in four categories. Based on the scoring of the test, out of 138 participants whose scores were between 51 and 60, 103 participants were selected.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the OPT

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
OPT	138	45.00	87.00	59.55	9.18	84.45
Valid N (listwise)	138					

Also, the mean of the listening scores was 20.31, the mode was 20 and the variance equaled 10.0, the lowest score was

12 and the highest score was 25.

Table 2: Listening Descriptive Statistics

N		Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Variance	Minimum	Maximum
Valid	Missing							
103	0	20.31	20.00	20.00	3.16	10.00	12.00	25.00

Table 3 shows the normality of the scores concerning socio-affective language learning strategies, anxiety, and EFL learners’ listening skill. As the obtained level of the

significance for all the variables was greater than 0.05, as a result socio-affective language learning strategies, anxiety, and listening scores are considered as normal variables.

Table 3: Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test Concerning All Variables

		Socio-Affective Language Learning Strategies	Anxiety	Listening
N		103	103	103
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	47.07	79.39	20.31
	Std. Deviation	6.61	26.55	3.16
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.11	.103	.13
	Positive	.08	.103	.08
	Negative	-.11	-.07	-.13
Test Statistic		.11	.10	.13
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.20 ^c	.20 ^c	.20 ^c

- a. Test distribution is Normal.
- b. Calculated from data.
- c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

Regarding the first hypothesis; that is, there is no statistically significant relationship among socio-affective language

learning strategies and learners’ anxiety, a Pearson Correlation was conducted.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Coefficient Concerning Socio-Affective Language Learning Strategies and EFL Learners’ Anxiety

		Socio-Affective Language Learning Strategies	Anxiety
Socio-Affective Language Learning Strategies	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.65**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	N	103	103
Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	-0.65**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	103	103

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to this table, the correlation equaled -0.65 and the obtained level of the significance was found to be 0.00. As a result, the null hypothesis which stated that there was no significant correlation between socio-affective language learning strategies and EFL learners' anxiety was rejected. This means that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between socio-affective language learning

strategies and anxiety of the EFL learners.

Research hypothesis two was aimed at investigating whether there is any statistically significant relationship among socio-affective language learning strategies and learners' listening skill or not. In order to test this hypothesis, another Pearson correlation was run between the two variables. Table 4.5 depicts their correlation.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Coefficient Concerning Socio-Affective Language Learning Strategies and Listening Skill

		Socio-Affective Language Learning Strategies	Listening
Socio-Affective Language Learning Strategies	Pearson Correlation	1	0.63**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	N	103	103
Listening	Pearson Correlation	0.63**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	103	103

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows the correlation between socio-affective language learning strategies and EFL learners' listening skill. According to this table, the correlation equaled 0.63 and the obtained level of the significance was found to be 0.00. As a result, the null hypothesis was rejected. This means that there was a significant positive correlation between socio-affective language learning strategies and EFL learners' listening skill.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study are in line with most of the previous studies such as Balemir (2009) ^[5] and Heng, Abdullah, and Yosaf (2012), Saltan (2003) ^[26], Tianjian (2010) ^[29] in that even the moderate level of this anxiety is alarming and needs to be dealt with care. This level might seem acceptable at first glance; however, this affective problem could discourage students from expressing their thoughts in English, affect their willingness to communicate (Wu & Lin, 2014) and hinder the development of communicative competence in the long run.

Moreover, the results are in contrast to previous studies as Tianjian (2010) ^[29] in the sense that intermediate learners seem to be more anxious. However, the present study is in accordance with the results of Balemir (2009) ^[5], meaning that level of the students is not a significant factor on FLSA. Foreign language learning is a life-long commitment (Horwitz, 1986) ^[14], so it should be the main objective of foreign language methodologists to find the most efficient methods for foreign language learning and teaching (Balemir, 2009) ^[5]. They should take into consideration the real needs of EFL learners and teachers, thus making the acquisition of foreign language more effective, enjoyable and less frustrating. Moreover, with socio-affective training, EFL teachers have an additional tool that helps them get to know learners individually and give them "learning-to-learn" tools that are useful both for their present life in class and for their future life outside the classroom. Instead of focusing on finding the best method or approach, the EFL field should devote time and energy to instructing EFL learners to be better informed about and prepared for their learning process. In the long run, this kind of instruction can empower learners by making them feel that they can experiment with their language learning and, ultimately, take control of their own language learning process.

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