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Critical Perspectives: Sociocultural Mediation and Strategy Development in EFL Classrooms



Linguistics Society of Iran

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, research on second and foreign language learning strategies has grown substantially, yielding important insights. However, most of this research has focused on cognitive approaches, with limited attention given to sociocultural perspectives, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Iran. The specific role of sociocultural mediation in addressing the challenges faced by EFL learners has not been extensively explored. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how mediated actions—such as learner diaries, language tasks, and teacher scaffolding techniques—can influence the development of language learning strategies. Framed by sociocultural theory, activity theory, and the genetic method, the study gathers data through a combination of learner diaries, observation field notes, and interviews with both students and teachers. The findings suggest that learner diaries play a crucial role in enhancing students' motivation and confidence. By encouraging students to set learning goals, engage in a variety of language tasks, and reflect on their progress, the diaries help learners become more aware of their learning processes and outcomes. Additionally, the study identifies specific factors that influence the development of learning strategies in listening and speaking classrooms. The implications of this research are significant for both teachers and learners. By providing a deeper understanding of how sociocultural tools can mediate language learning, the study offers practical insights that can help improve the effectiveness of EFL instruction and support learners in overcoming difficulties in language acquisition.

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Introduction

The learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) has always been regarded as a challenging task and this is evident in many studies to delineate major problems of EFL learners and trace sources and solutions. English in non-English speaking countries is used in two contexts, English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL). Unlike the ESL context, where English is used as a means of communication and is learnt through communication in social situations, in the EFL context, as in the case of Iran, English has no vital function in people's everyday life and communication, and as Yarahmadi (2008) notes, it is learning through classroom instruction and the use of audio-visual materials for educational and or academic purposes, job opportunities and increasing the possibility of higher education. So, in such a situation the learners do not have any immediate purpose to use English for communicative functions (Khajavi and Abbasian 2011; Lan 2005). It is important to know that in the educational system in Iran, teaching English language is done systematically from secondary school or junior high school. Students study for three years at this level and receive teaching and instruction for English vocabulary, grammar and dialogues organized and planned by the Ministry of Education. The next level is high school where students study for another three years. English is studied and taught for two hours a week with the focus on reading comprehension. After high school, Iranian students attend the pre-university level for one educational year receiving instruction on English as a school subject for four hours per week. Along the same line, the English textbook is based on the reading method (Riazi and Razavipour 2011). In universities, English is offered as both General English and English as a university major in different fields including Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English Language and Literature, and Translation. During the first four semesters of the 7 semesters for the Bachelor degree in the English language, all students are instructed in each of the four skill areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the next three semesters the students receive instruction for their specialized field of study. It is worth mentioning that some factors have recently promoted the significance of learning English for the EFL members. "English seems to have found its way smoothly right to the Iranian society, proving itself to be a necessity, rather than a mere school subject" (Dahmardeh 2009:278). The widespread interest in the growth and use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) worldwide compounds the need for international communications, and the English language provides a doorway as it is the medium of international communication. Gorjian (2006:2) agrees that "the emergence of new trends in L2 teaching around the world has affected teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Iran in terms of the influence of internet websites, satellite television, and computer-based teaching in the Iranian institutes and universities". In a similar line, Dahmardeh (2009:278) summarizes the ways through which Iranian society is affected by English dailies, weeklies, journals and other English periodicals directed by Iranian nationals are issued and available throughout the country. The internet, the use of which requires a substantial English proficiency level and through which people enjoy world relationships, has gained national

recognition. International book fairs and trade exhibitions held annually in the capital demonstrate the country's readiness and its dependable capacity to maintain its world relationships in English. In the Iranian EFL context the lack of exposure to the English language has forced most of the people including primary, secondary, high school, and university students and even people with different educational levels and fields to language institutes for opportunities to practice the language (Hosseini 2007; Farhadi, Sajadi, & Hedayati 2010). "While there is an increasing tendency among people to learn English, as the medium of scientific resources, references, and communication...the private language institutes have taken the responsibility of supporting people to meet.

Currently in dealing with listening and speaking skills through which one can communicate orally, private institutes attempt to provide their learners with real-life contexts through computer-based teaching and by using different websites to encourage learners experience with English throughout the world (Khajavi and Abbasian 2011; Gorjian 2006). This situation has set the scene for the achievement of some Iranian EFL learners in learning English. Apart from private language institutes as a source to promote learners' ability to communicate in English, another contributing reason which maximizes the learners' efforts in learning English and becoming effective communicators is their motivation. This motivation roots in both affective and financial support from parents, friends, and government (e.g. budget, favorable learning conditions, and availability of learning resources). Likewise, in recent years, experts in the field of ELT in Iran have extensively studied the sources of the EFL learners' communication problems. Vaezi (2008) discussed that this problem is partly due to the L2 learners' weaknesses in general English, which influence their academic achievement. Rahimi and Abedini (2009) considered low general aptitude as the source of low achievement of Iranian EFL learners. In identifying the sources of EFL learners' problems, some other Iranian researchers believe that the programmes presented in schools and universities do not provide the students' with opportunities to use English communicatively. Talebinezhad and Sadegi (2005:86) indicate unsatisfactory instruction in schools and universities in the sense that: Deficiency of public schools and universities in satisfying students' everincreasing desire to learn English communicatively resulted in an extensive and still growing private sector of English language in the country a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at primary school and even pre-school levels. Eslami-Rasekh and Valizade (2004) believe that in Iran, the traditional teachercentered curriculum dominates the teaching and learning process in both schools and universities. Teachers and lecturers transfer knowledge and experiences to students with the aim of helping them pass examinations. A similar view was expressed by Hayati (2008) who states that most Iranian English classes still follow traditional methods of language teaching. He maintains that the general goal of the system of education in Iran regarding English language teaching is confined to reading and translation of the English materials containing scientific information. Furthermore, Jamalimanesh (2009) states that classroom facilities that can provide the teacher with the opportunity to diversify teaching In emphasizing the sources of the EFL learners' problems discussed above, the researcher believes that

one reason is teachers' teaching style which does not encourage the learners to have and improve their sense of self-regulation and self-assessment. Also evaluation techniques by some teachers hinder real communicative interaction and indeed interrupt the emergence of functional strategies. A colleague asked his students to memorize seven words daily as a vocabulary learning strategy without providing sufficient practice on contextual use. This means the learner is incapable of using the words in a realistic communicative context such as communicating with a foreigner. Thus, such a situation makes the learner only satisfy the teachers' expectations which in turn reduces the learners' need to develop communication strategies. In such a setting, the learners are passive consumers of the teacher-planned lesson. In order for any learning to take place in listening-speaking classroom, the learners memorize the dialogues in their textbooks, complete fill-in-the-blanks exercises and are expected to understand all the words and sentences they receive as input. There is scant attention on speaking. Speaking activities are pursued in the form of dialogue memorization with a very restricted chance of interaction. Furthermore, the teacher's mediating role is limited to the presentation of language materials and classroom management. Finally, the students are assessed and evaluated on the mastery of language forms at the end of the semester. Basically, such a classroom culture might reduce the possibility of developing learning strategies and improving communication abilities. Additionally, in such a context as Donato and McCormic (1994) state, the learners are deprived of any sense of self-assessment and self-regulation necessary for strategic learning.

Statement of the problem

The earlier discussion on Iranian EFL learners' difficulties in the English classroom (Ghorbani 2011; Vaezi 2008; Yarahmadi 2008; Hayati 2008; Hosseini 2007; Jahangard 2007; Riazi and Razmjoo 2006; Talebinezhad and Sadeghi 2005; Eslami Rasekh & Valizade 2004; Li 1998; Hortwiz 1996) sheds light on the focused problem of the present study. The problem addressed in this study is that Iranian EFL learners are almost incapable of developing language learning strategies and communicating effectively in English as the traditional classroom culture does not provide the learners with the opportunity to generate and develop language learning strategies. Research on second and foreign language learning strategies has mushroomed over the last three decades and some very valuable studies have been conducted. Most, however examine strategies from a cognitive perspective, with fewer studies examining the emergence of learning strategies from a sociocultural perspective. In particular, the role of sociocultural mediation has not been specifically investigated as a solution for EFL learners' difficulties by Iranian researchers. Looking through a socio-cultural lens, some of the difficulties EFL learners face can be traced to their learning context. Since listening and speaking are considered as two fundamental skills in the process of oral communication in English, in this study within the Iranian EFL learning context, listening-speaking is selected as a setting to collect data from. Listening-speaking classroom similar to any other classes is like a tapestry which is woven from different strands, such as the physical and social atmosphere or setting, the teacher, learners,

language tasks and activities. It is obvious that any learner's strategy use is to a great extent dependent on the social life of the classroom, as is evident in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) in which the social process, interactions and the use of signs and tools as vehicles for constructing knowledge are emphasized. One of the outstanding features of sociocultural theory is considering learning as social where meaning is derived through language use within the social context. So, it can be concluded that the classroom is a social place where learning is formed by increasing and improving the learner's participation in classroom interaction which results in the emergence of learning strategies. In other words, it is interpreted that the only way for learning and developing learning strategies is not strategy training which is currently used in Iranian undergraduate listening-speaking classroom. Instead, learning strategies can be developed in social communities where the novice individuals are invited by more experienced participants including the teacher or peers and are involved in complete participation in socioculturally-based practices of their classroom (Gao 2010; Donato). In order to contextualize this description of a classroom, designing a different classroom culture at the expense of EFL traditional discourse format is necessary. In this respect, using sociocultural theory promotes a learning context in which teacher acts as a facilitator in constructing meaning. Thus, there will be a reciprocal relationship between students and teacher in learning process. The socioculturally organized context is assumed to enrich the current listening-speaking classroom.

Literature Review

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been a significant area of research in second language studies since the late 1970s. The interest in LLS was particularly sparked by Rubin's 1975 article on what successful language learners do, which led to an increased focus among researchers and educators on the potential role of these strategies in facilitating second or foreign language learning.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined strategies as the specific thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain information. This definition underscores the utility of LLS by highlighting their role in helping learners understand and assimilate new information. Importantly, their classification includes cognitive strategies, which involve the mental processes used in learning; metacognitive strategies, which include planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning; and social/affective strategies.

Cohen (1998) further distinguished language use strategies from LLS by emphasizing that the former assist learners in using their interlanguage and include strategies such as communication techniques and circumlocution. Meanwhile, Oxford (1990) defined LLS as specific actions taken by learners to make their learning faster, more enjoyable, self-directed, effective, and transferable to new

situations. Oxford's definition is notable for its focus on the practical aspects of LLS, emphasizing their role in enhancing the overall process of language learning.

The review also explores the distinction between cognitive and sociocultural perspectives on LLS. While cognitive definitions, like those from O'Malley and Chamot, focus on individual learning actions for effective learning, sociocultural perspectives, as discussed by Oxford and Shramm (2007), view LLS as socially mediated actions aimed at achieving learning goals. This sociocultural approach is particularly relevant to the study, as it provides a framework for analyzing data based on learners' interactions within their social contexts.

Further, the review discusses the various taxonomies developed by researchers to categorize LLS. Rubin (1981) identified two broad categories of strategies: direct strategies, which directly assist learners in their language learning, and indirect strategies, which support learning in less direct ways. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified strategies into three categories within their information-processing model: metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies.

Among the different models, Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is highlighted as the most comprehensive. This model includes six categories of strategies: metacognitive, cognitive, affective, compensation, memory, and social strategies, and has been widely used to assess and improve language learning strategies.

Overall, the literature review emphasizes the fundamental role of LLS in enhancing language performance, fostering learner autonomy, and improving instructional methods. Oxford's model, in particular, is regarded as a critical framework for understanding and applying LLS in educational contexts.

Research in Teaching Language Learning Strategies

After much research in the field of strategies in general and investigating the factors influencing strategy use, many researchers conducted a number of studies dealing with the belief of teaching strategies. Tang and Moore (1992) conducted a research in which they tried to examine the effects of the teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies used in reading comprehension. They found that cognitive and metacognitive strategies present different results after treatment or instruction. In their study, students' cognitive strategy instructions enhanced their comprehension scores, however, their performance changed after removing treatment. In the same occasion, metacognitive strategy instruction presented stable results concerning development in comprehension ability both before and after treatment.

In another classroom based study, Nunan (1995:3) examined the effect of strategy instruction on developing knowledge, attitudes and skills. In his study, Nunan involved 60 students in a 12-week programme “designed to help them reflect on their own learning, to develop their knowledge of, and ability to apply learning strategies, to assess their own progress, and to apply their language skills beyond the classroom”. The most practical result of his study was considering both teaching content of lesson and an awareness of language processes as the base of language classroom.

Naughton (2006) examined an interesting model of strategy training, called cooperative strategy training, on the interaction patterns of a small group of students who were involved in an oral discussion task assigned by the teacher. The main assumption behind this program was that the teacher can train his/her students to interact with their peers and with the task so that they would be able to enhance learning opportunities. The experimental treatments were videotaped. Data were analyzed in order to measure any significant changes during the whole participation of the students particularly strategic participation, and any individual strategy use. The results of pretest indicated that before strategy training, interaction patterns did not appear to be those viewed significant for language acquisition from the viewpoints of both traditional second language acquisition (SLA) and sociocultural research. However, the results of posttest showed that that the strategy training program was effective to a considerable extent in encouraging students to involve themselves in such interactional sequences.

Although strategy instruction proved to be effective based on different research in the field and proved to help learners in increasing self-reliance and motivated independent learning, some studies reported an opposite result for the usefulness of language learning strategy instruction. O'Malley (1987) and his colleagues involved 75 students in one of three instructional groups. In this training program students received a) socioaffective, metacognitive, cognitive strategies, b) socioaffective and cognitive strategies, or c) as control group no any specific treatment in using learning strategies for the acquisition of speaking, listening and vocabulary. Surprisingly, they found that in learning vocabulary, the control group did much better than the experimental groups.

Swan (2008) claimed that while strategy instruction can foster learner independence, it may not be treated as a perfect replacement for basic language teaching and for better results even this independence needs to be directed. He highlights that training students in strategy use is certainly a constructive idea, provided the teacher has a clear target for teaching strategies and more importantly, the strategies intended for training can be taught. In his view, metacognitive strategies are justified to be helpful for training, as they can assist language learners in assessing and directing their learning. Swan notes that it is not recommended, for instance, to train students to deal with their aural comprehension difficulties by employing a wide range of ‘listening skills’ before training them to remove particular phonological problems. These problems may appear in distinguishing weak forms,

vowel differentiation or complex consonant clusters, which are in turn the major source of problems in aural comprehension. To conclude it should be noted that in accordance with the discussion mentioned above, and regarding the listening-speaking classroom as a social setting, in this study the students will not receive any direct instruction or training on using LLSs.

The literature on the use of diaries in second language research indicates that diary studies date back to the second half of the 1970's. As an expert in the field of language learning strategies, Rubin (1981) found that guided diary writing is an effective way to obtain learning strategy use. In this connection, Oxford (1996) also states that one useful way to assess strategies is language learning diaries, and their usefulness is in their self-report nature which provides the learners with the opportunity to state their current learning story. As Oxford (1996) explains, these diaries can be interpreted either quantitatively by examining calculations or qualitatively through including qualitative impressions of strategy use such as the role of social context, emotions, motivation, etc. Gilar, Ruiz and Costa (2007) believe that diary keeping is specifically useful for externalizing a series of concealed strategic activities which can be obtained only from the description of the learner who is using them in the learning process. Yang (2007) explains the advantages of journal or diary writing: first, it provides an opportunity for learners to practice using the target language; second, it leads to a rich source of awareness for students in terms of their learning process, i.e. how learning is most effective. The issues discussed above were later operationalized by other experts (Ochesner 1998; Bailey 1990) in research methodology.

Diary analysis proved a great success in Halbach's (2000) study that used diaries to examine strategy use of 181 English language students. To do so, participants were asked to keep diaries as one part of their course requirements. In designing the diary, Halbach gave two models to her students as a guideline, as she asked her students to include any required information in both models. The participants had to submit their diaries at the end of the semester. After collecting and analyzing them, the researcher came to some interesting results. First, it was found that diaries are effective tools to examine learners' strategy use. Second, through learners' diaries some differences were captured between successful and unsuccessful learners' strategy use, and third, diary analysis provided the researcher with the opportunity to discover the usefulness of designing an effective learner-training program to focus on problematic aspects of strategy use.

Gilar, et al. (2007) used the diary as a tool to assess the learning strategies of postgraduate students who were in their first year of master program. In their study, they compared the results obtained from diaries with those using an inventory as a traditional assessing method. Their intent was to find out learning strategies used by the trainee teachers and their immediate impact on the results of the knowledge received. Furthermore, they tried to examine if there were any variations in strategy assessment between inventories and diaries. The participants completed the diaries from the time the

teacher started to teach until the assessment of the learned knowledge. According to their findings, the deliberate use of strategies (received from the diaries) has influenced knowledge acquisition positively. Also using qualitative analysis, the researchers proved that diaries are more valuable than traditional inventories. Equally important, apart from diaries' uses on uncovering learners' strategy use, diaries are also considered as a source to elicit learners' difficulties particularly in ESL/EFL settings. Huang (2005) examined Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of difficulties in learning English as a foreign language and their responses to the perceived difficulties through learners' diaries. The findings from learners' diaries indicated that linguistic competence is the students' major learning difficulty; however, deeper analysis showed that this problem stemmed from the stressful nature of examinations imposed on learners. Furthermore, some socio-psychological constraints were elicited from learners' diaries including undesirable teacher-learner relationships, negative self-assessment, the stressful context of the examination, ineffective study skills, and some hurdles to independent learning which in turn influence learning.

Language Learning Strategies and Cognitive Perspective

Mayer (1988:11) defined LLS as "behaviors of a learner that are intended to influence how the learners process information". This can imply that language learners employ 31 learning strategies in processing information so as to gain fruitful outcomes for their learning. Important to realize is that information processing theory plays the role of the bridge between language learning strategies and cognitive science regardless of function of language learning strategies in foreign language learning or learning strategies in educational psychology. In their study O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 17) state that, "the role of learning strategies in the acquisition of information generally can be understood by reference to the information processing framework for learning". Based on this premise, new information is stored in the short-term memory after it is acquired for a short period of time by virtue of limited space of short-term memory. However, unlimited information is stored in long-term memory due to unlimited capacity. Long-term memory receives and stores the information as either declarative knowledge or procedural knowledge. The difference between the two kinds of knowledge is that the former is conscious knowledge which is achieved during an effortful process, and includes definitions of words, or conventions of punctuation, but the latter is a kind of unconscious knowledge which is achieved without any effort and automatically, for example using correct punctuation as a writing habit. The optimum way of learning declarative knowledge is through dealing with schemata and activating existing knowledge whereas procedural knowledge is best learned by practicing a goal-directed procedure. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), the knowledge of strategies moves from declarative to the procedural. They continue that since learning strategy in definitions is conscious, it is considered as a process. Finally O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 52) concluded that "learning strategies are complex procedures that individuals apply to tasks; consequently, they may be represented as procedural knowledge which may be acquired through cognitive, associative, and

autonomous stages of learning”. Therefore, cognitive approach to language learning strategies is not a suitable framework for the purposes of the present study as it does not consider the social cultural aspects of learning strategies. Over the years, researchers have experienced difficulties in researching language learning strategies concerning their nature. To clarify, there was a debate among strategy researchers on whether they are directly observable. Thus, different researchers opted to study and analyze learners’ behaviors. To elaborate the first aspect, it should be noted that one of the most frequently and earliest used themes is gathering of data about successful language learners and what it is that distinguishes successful from unsuccessful language learners. A considerable amount of literature has been published concerning the strategies employed by successful and unsuccessful learners (Qingquan and Chaptupote 2008; Ehrman and Oxford 1995; O’Malley and Chamot 1985, 1985a; Fillmore 1982; Naiman et al. 1978; Rubin 1975) however, the profound explanation and discussion of the studies falls outside the scope of this study. Rubin (1975) found that successful language learners have strong tendency to communicate, take risks in the whole learning process and monitor their learning. Other researchers (Naiman et.al 1978; O’Malley &Chamot (1985) and Ehrman & Oxford (1995) characterized the successful learners for their ability in practicing on metacognitive strategies, developing the target language as a separate system and using cognitive strategies. The strategy use of successful language learners was further investigated by Qingquan & Chatupote (2008). In their study, good language learners were found to L2 based association, have active participation in the learning process and monitor the strategies they used.

Criticism of LLS Research

Ellis (1994:533) states that “definitions of learning strategies have tended to be ad hoc and a theoretical”. The key point is that the most outstanding criticism is attributed to the quantitative methodology in LLS research. For instance, Vandergrift (1998:371) challenges the accuracy of the quantitative research on LLS for being unable to “capture how a strategy is used or how it is combined with other strategies to trigger meaning. Neither can it capture the effective use of a strategy such as the accuracy of an inference, the appropriate use of elaboration or the depth of interaction with the text”. Conducting qualitative research and probing strategies as they emerge within learners’ activities has been suggested by Donato and McCormic (1994) as one possible solution for this problem. Tseng et al. (2006) argue that language learning strategy research has faced up to a number of problems including methodological and theoretical basis. In other words, as evident in some other studies (Macaro 2006; Dornyei 2005; Ellis 1994), it is not theoretically and methodologically obvious whether language learning strategies should be considered as ‘observable behaviors or inner mental operations, or both’ (Tseng et al. 2006: 80). Thus, the authors put forward a shift in the focus of research on language learning strategies from strategy use to self-regulation. In response to their proposal, Gao (2007) discusses the latest progress in LLS research specifically development in terms of determining a new theoretical framework. This new framework probes

strategies from sociocultural perspective. As a result, strategy researchers have changed their line of inquiry to a process-based investigation of strategies (Macaro 2006; Donato and McCormick 1994). In accordance with Gao's claim on establishing a new framework, Macaro (2006: 325) presented a framework in which learning strategy is analyzed "in terms of a goal, a situation, and a mental action". Accordingly, for testing the framework, Macaro utilizes a task-based self-report protocol instrument. In a word, regarding the framework of the present research, Macaro's framework seems to be in correspondence with a learning theory, namely, activity theory in which learning strategies are supposed to emerge from the mediation of human activity. Adopting this line of change, Hsiao and Oxford (2002) ventured conducting a task-based investigation to examine dynamic strategy use of language learners. For these reasons studying strategies within social cultural perspectives is recommended for future research.

Therefore, the first development was to construct a task-based basis for research on LLS as Gao (2007) stated that such developments in LLS research can increase the improvement of self-regulation in research on strategic orientation to learning. A second development, is looking at strategy research from socio-cultural perspective (e.g. Gao 2006; Parks and Raymond 2004; Norton and Toohey 2001; Wenden 1998; Donato and McCormick 1994). Based on sociocultural perspective, in learners' using of strategies two important factors are involved, the cognitive choice of language learner and mediation of learning activities. Such development in strategy research would heighten our understanding of learning strategies as the outcome of mediated learning within social settings. Gao (2007), stresses the use of qualitative and multi-method approaches as necessary for the effectiveness of such a development in learning strategy research since through this approach researchers can be cognizant of the dynamic interaction between language learners' activity and social setting. Interestingly, in elaborating the effect of setting in the development of LLSs, Liang (2009:201) states that "It has become increasingly acknowledged that learning strategies are more likely to be improved in appropriate settings and through carefully chosen tasks".

Research Questions

In order to attend to the mentioned objectives, the study will answer the following questions:

1. How do the following mediating agents influence learners' strategy development in listening-speaking classroom? a. diary? b. teacher ? c. language tasks ?
2. What are the learners' perceptions of factors which influence their strategy development?

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the impact of sociocultural mediation on the development of language learning strategies (LLS) among Iranian EFL learners. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT), the research examines how interactions between learners and their sociocultural environment shape and influence LLS development.

Research Design

A qualitative case study was chosen to provide an in-depth examination of the nuanced and context-specific factors influencing LLS development. This approach facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the processes and outcomes associated with sociocultural mediation, capturing the complexity of learners' strategic behaviors within their specific cultural context.

Methodological Framework

The methodological framework is rooted in SCT, utilizing both the genetic and activity methods to offer a dynamic, context-sensitive perspective on language learning. These methods emphasize the role of social interaction and cultural tools in shaping learners' strategies.

1. **Genetic Method:** This method is operationalized by tracing the evolution of LLS over time through longitudinal data collection methods, such as learner diaries and interviews. These tools capture the progression and transformation of learners' strategies, providing insights into the mediating factors that influence this development (Wang & Chen, 2023).
2. **Activity Method:** The activity method examines the broader context of language learning activities, emphasizing their sociocultural dimensions. This approach considers various mediating tools, including instructional materials and social interactions, that facilitate strategy development (Liu, 2022).

Context of the Study

The study is conducted within an Iranian EFL classroom, a culturally specific setting that highlights traditional teaching practices focused on rote memorization and grammar instruction. This environment contrasts with the interactive and communicative approaches advocated by SCT, offering a rich context for examining LLS development.

Sample Population

The sample consists of six Iranian EFL learners selected based on their willingness to participate and their language proficiency levels. This purposive sampling strategy ensures that participants are representative of the target population, enabling the study to generate relevant and insightful findings.

Data Collection Instruments

1. **Learner Diaries:** Learner diaries serve as a reflective tool, allowing participants to document their learning experiences, challenges, and strategies over time. This longitudinal data provides detailed insights into the participants' evolving LLS (Jin & Erben, 2020).
2. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with students and teachers capture their perceptions of the mediation process and its impact on LLS. This flexible method allows for an in-depth exploration of emerging themes, offering a comprehensive understanding of the mediation's effectiveness (Saxton, 2005).
3. **Observations and Field Notes:** Classroom interactions and the use of mediating tools are documented through observations and field notes. This data offers a contextualized understanding of the learning environment and the dynamics of the mediation process, contributing to a holistic view of the instructional context (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher assumes a dual role as a participant-observer, engaging in the mediation process while collecting data. This role allows for a deep understanding of the instructional context and the learners' strategic behaviors, while maintaining an objective stance in data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are carefully addressed throughout the research. Participants provided informed consent, and their confidentiality is maintained to ensure respectful and ethical treatment. The study adheres to established ethical guidelines in educational research, prioritizing the well-being and autonomy of the participants (Tran & Phan Tran, 2021).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis, which involves identifying patterns and themes across the data collected from diaries, interviews, observations and also fieldnotes. This approach aligns with the qualitative nature of the study and the principles of SCT, allowing for a detailed exploration of the mediation process and its effects on LLS development (Nicol, 2010).

Mediating Agents in Learners' Strategy Development in Listening-Speaking Classrooms

Effective strategy development in language learning often hinges on various mediating agents that influence how students approach and refine their skills. This discussion examines how diaries, teachers, and language tasks serve as critical mediating agents in the strategy development of learners in a listening-speaking classroom. The findings discussed are drawn from an analysis of the experiences of the participants, namely Sara, Leila, Minoo and Pooya in a study exploring these dynamics.

1) Diary Writing as a Mediating Agent

a) Role in Strategy Development

Diary writing played a pivotal role in the strategy development of the learners, acting as a reflective tool that helped them identify challenges and devise solutions. For Leila, diary writing initially posed a challenge, but it soon became an integral part of her learning strategy. She stated, "*Diary writing was a complex task at the beginning, but with our teacher's help, it became easier. We could identify problems in class and find specific solutions*" (Leila, interview 1). This shift highlights how the reflective nature of diary writing enabled her to engage in self-assessment, which is critical in strategy development.

Sara also found diary writing beneficial, particularly in identifying learning issues and systematically addressing them: "*Previously, we didn't have this kind of task, but now when we see these tasks, we think about our problems and must solve them. Diary writing has helped us lower our problems little by little*" (Sara, interview 2). This indicates that diary writing facilitated a structured approach to problem-solving, allowing her to monitor her progress and refine her strategies.

Minoo echoed these sentiments, noting that diary writing encouraged her to deeply reflect on her language challenges: "*Diary writing encourages me to think about my problems deeply, and I really think to solve them*" (Minoo, second interview). This practice enabled Minoo to focus on specific issues, such as vocabulary enhancement, which is crucial for her language development.

The literature supports the use of reflective practices like diary writing as a way to develop metacognitive strategies, which are essential for autonomous learning. Lee (2022) highlights that diary writing enhances metacognitive skills and language awareness, allowing learners to actively engage in their learning process. This aligns with Walqui's (2006) scaffolding types, particularly in developing metacognition, as diary writing encourages self-assessment and continuous improvement.

b) Impact on Learning Outcomes

The impact of diary writing on learning outcomes was significant across all participants. Leila's ability to self-assess through diary writing was evident in her improved scores, which rose from 80 in listening-speaking level 3 to 100 in level 4 (Leila, group interview). This suggests that diary writing helped her better understand and apply new language strategies, directly contributing to her enhanced performance.

Sara experienced a similar trajectory. Despite initial challenges, maintaining a diary allowed her to identify and address her weaknesses, particularly in role-plays, leading to an increase in her scores from 61 to 89 (Sara, focus-group interview). This improvement underscores the effectiveness of diary writing in fostering strategic development and language skill enhancement.

Minoo also benefited from diary writing, with her progress reflected in an increase in scores from 62 in level 3 to 85 in level 4 (Minoo, focus-group interview). By tracking her difficulties and devising strategies for improvement, Minoo was able to make substantial gains in her language learning.

The positive outcomes associated with diary writing align with the findings of previous research. Studies have shown that reflective practices, such as diary writing, not only improve language proficiency but also boost learners' confidence and motivation by providing a clear record of progress and areas needing attention (Lee, 2022; Walqui, 2006).

2) Teacher as a Mediating Agent

a) Role in Strategy Development

The teacher's role was crucial in shaping the learners' strategy development by providing guidance, feedback, and creating a supportive environment. For Leila, the teacher's use of English as the primary medium of instruction, along with strategic scaffolding, was vital: "*The teacher used English as the medium of instruction, but when necessary, she used our native language for clarification*" (Leila, interview 1). This approach facilitated Leila's engagement with the language, helping her overcome barriers and apply new strategies.

Sara also appreciated the teacher's methods, particularly the use of communicative tasks and interactive methods: *"The teacher introduced tasks like role-plays and group discussions that made learning English interesting and engaging"* (Sara, focus-group interview). This student-centered approach contrasts with traditional methods, highlighting the teacher's role in fostering an interactive and supportive learning environment.

Minoo valued the teacher's method of evaluation, which focused on class activities rather than final exams: *"Now our final grade is our activities in class, and this encourages me to participate in class activities...we have no final exam, which reduces my stress"* (Minoo, second interview). This shift from exam-based assessment to continuous evaluation motivated Minoo to engage more deeply in the learning process.

Pooya also noted the positive impact of the teacher's approach, particularly the friendly and stress-free context that encouraged interaction: *"The teacher's friendly and stress-free context encouraged us to interact and show ourselves, which improved our listening and speaking skills"* (Pooya, group interview). This environment was conducive to active participation, which is crucial for strategy development.

The literature emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role in language learning, particularly in providing scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as posited by Vygotsky (1978). Johnson (2023) further supports this by highlighting that effective language teachers act as facilitators who create opportunities for meaningful communication and reflection, which aligns with the experiences of Leila, Sara, Minoo, and Pooya.

b) Impact on Learning Outcomes

The teacher's influence on learning outcomes was substantial, as reflected in the improved scores of all participants. Leila's progress, with scores increasing from 80 to 100, was directly linked to the teacher's effective instructional strategies and feedback (Leila, group interview). The support provided by the teacher played a key role in facilitating Leila's strategic development and language skill enhancement.

Sara's improvement, with her scores rising from 61 to 89, was similarly attributed to the teacher's methods. The engaging and supportive classroom environment created by the teacher was crucial in helping Sara develop effective language strategies (Sara, focus-group interview).

Minoo's learning outcomes also improved significantly, with her scores increasing from 62 to 85. This progress was attributed to the teacher's supportive methods and focus on class activities, which motivated Minoo to actively participate and refine her strategies (Minoo, focus-group interview).

Pooya's marked improvement, with scores rising from 77 to 98, further illustrates the impact of the teacher's interactive and stress-free approach (Pooya, group interview). The teacher's role in creating a positive learning environment was instrumental in enhancing Pooya's language skills.

These outcomes align with findings from recent literature that emphasize the importance of effective teaching methods and scaffolding in promoting language learning success (Johnson, 2023; Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher's ability to provide a supportive environment, coupled with practical guidance, significantly contributed to the learners' improved performance.

3) Language Tasks as a Mediating Agent

a) Role in Strategy Development

Language tasks were central to the strategy development of the learners, providing practical opportunities to apply and refine their skills. Leila found tasks such as pair-work and group discussions integral to her learning: "*Completing tasks like pair-work and group discussions gave me a sense of achievement and helped me practice my English in real contexts*" (Leila, group interview). These tasks allowed her to apply new strategies and receive feedback, which is crucial for language development.

Sara also benefited from the variety of language tasks introduced by the teacher. She particularly appreciated role-plays and group discussions: "*The role-plays and group activities we did in class helped me practice speaking in different situations and gain confidence*" (Sara, focus-group interview). These tasks provided her with practical applications of language skills, facilitating her strategic development.

Minoo valued group work and interactive tasks as part of her strategy development: "*I think when I speak in a group, if I make a mistake, my friends correct me, and it is helpful*" (Minoo, second interview). The interactive nature of these tasks allowed Minoo to practice her language skills in a supportive environment, helping her to refine her strategies.

Pooya also appreciated the variety of tasks introduced by the teacher, noting that they guided his strategy development: "*Doing different activities guided and assigned by the teacher helped me develop my listening and speaking abilities*" (Pooya, second interview). These tasks provided Pooya with opportunities to practice and receive feedback, contributing to his improved performance.

The literature supports the use of task-based learning as an effective method for developing language strategies. Lantolf (2023) argues that tasks should provide opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful and contextualized language use, which is reflected in the experiences of the participants. The tasks in this study were designed to be context-specific and learner-centered, aligning with best practices in language teaching.

b) Impact on Learning Outcomes

The impact of language tasks on learning outcomes was significant. Leila's engagement with various tasks contributed to her improved scores, reflecting the effectiveness of these tasks in supporting her strategic development (Leila, group interview). Her ability to apply feedback from these tasks to her practice was crucial in enhancing her language skills.

Sara's increased proficiency, with her scores rising from 61 to 89, was also linked to the effective language tasks she engaged in (Sara, focus-group interview). The practical application of language skills through these tasks played a significant role in her development.

Minoo's progress, reflected in her score increase from 62 to 85, was facilitated by her active participation in tasks and activities. The opportunity to engage in group work and receive feedback from peers was instrumental in her language learning (Minoo, focus-group interview).

Pooya's marked improvement, with his scores rising from 77 to 98, was similarly attributed to his active participation in language tasks (Pooya, group interview). The variety and practicality of these tasks provided him with the necessary practice to enhance his language skills.

These findings align with the literature on task-based language learning, which emphasizes the importance of engaging learners in meaningful activities that mimic real-life language use. Research by Ellis (2021) and Lantolf (2023) suggests that tasks that involve active participation and communication not only enhance language skills but also promote the development of learning strategies, as evidenced by the participants' experiences in this study.

4) L1 as a Mediating Agent

a) Role in Strategy Development

The use of the learners' first language (L1) was another significant mediating factor in strategy development, providing a bridge between new concepts and the learners' existing knowledge base. Leila appreciated the teacher's selective use of L1, especially when explaining complex grammatical rules: *"When the teacher used our native language to explain complicated grammar, I understood it*

better and could apply it to my English practice” (Leila, interview 1). This strategic use of L1 helped Leila make connections between the two languages, facilitating her understanding and application of new strategies.

Sara similarly noted the benefits of L1 in learning English: “*Sometimes I need to translate from English to my native language to understand better. It helps me to organize my thoughts and find better solutions when learning English*” (Sara, focus-group interview). This indicates that L1 played a crucial role in cognitive organization and strategy formation, aiding Sara in her language learning process.

Minoo also relied on her native language for clarification, particularly when encountering new vocabulary: “*Using our native language helps me understand the meaning of new words better and use them correctly in English sentences*” (Minoo, second interview). The ability to translate and compare languages enabled Minoo to develop more effective vocabulary strategies.

Pooya, on the other hand, mentioned that while the use of L1 was less frequent, it was helpful in reducing confusion during complex explanations: “*The teacher didn’t use our native language much, but when she did, it cleared up any confusion we had*” (Pooya, group interview). This selective use of L1 provided clarity and facilitated more effective learning strategies.

The literature supports the strategic use of L1 in language learning, particularly in situations where it can clarify difficult concepts or bridge gaps in understanding. Cook (2022) emphasizes that L1 can serve as a cognitive tool, helping learners make sense of new information and develop strategies that are transferable to the target language. This aligns with the experiences of the participants, who found that the judicious use of L1 enhanced their comprehension and strategic development.

b) Impact on Learning Outcomes

The impact of using L1 as a mediating agent on learning outcomes was nuanced and varied among the participants. Leila’s understanding and application of grammatical concepts, facilitated by L1, contributed to her improved performance and higher scores (Leila, group interview). The strategic use of L1 helped her overcome initial challenges, leading to better language proficiency.

Sara’s improved ability to organize her thoughts and apply language strategies was reflected in her rising scores, which were bolstered by her occasional reliance on L1 (Sara, focus-group interview). The cognitive support provided by L1 allowed her to process and retain new language information more effectively.

Minoo's learning outcomes were also positively influenced by her use of L1, particularly in vocabulary acquisition. The ability to compare and contrast linguistic structures between her native language and English helped her to enhance her vocabulary and overall language skills, as seen in her increased scores (Minoo, focus-group interview).

Pooya, while benefiting less frequently from L1, still saw its positive impact on his learning outcomes, particularly in terms of clarity and comprehension during complex lessons. This strategic use of L1 contributed to his overall language development and improved scores (Pooya, group interview).

These outcomes reflect findings in the literature that suggest L1 can be a valuable resource in language learning when used strategically and judiciously. Research by Cook (2022) and Ellis (2021) suggests that L1 can support cognitive processes, making it easier for learners to grasp complex concepts and develop effective learning strategies, which ultimately leads to better language proficiency.

5) Materials as a Mediating Agent

a) Role in Strategy Development

The materials used in the language learning process served as vital tools in the development of learning strategies. Leila found the materials, particularly visual aids and interactive exercises, helpful in understanding and applying new language concepts: *"The visual aids and interactive exercises in our textbooks helped me remember new words and use them in different contexts"* (Leila, interview 1). These materials provided Leila with opportunities to engage with the language in varied and meaningful ways, facilitating strategy development.

Sara also appreciated the diverse range of materials provided by the teacher, noting their role in enhancing her language skills: *"We used a variety of materials like videos, flashcards, and worksheets. These helped me practice different aspects of English and improved my understanding"* (Sara, focus-group interview). The variety of materials allowed Sara to develop multiple strategies for different language skills, from listening and speaking to reading and writing.

Minoo highlighted the importance of authentic materials, such as newspapers and magazines, which helped her apply language in real-life contexts: *"Reading authentic materials like newspapers improved my reading skills and gave me real-life examples of how English is used"* (Minoo, second interview). These materials helped Minoo connect classroom learning to real-world application, enhancing her strategic development.

Pooya also found the use of multimedia and interactive materials beneficial: “*Using multimedia like videos and audio clips made learning more interesting and helped me improve my listening skills*” (Pooya, group interview). The use of diverse materials catered to different learning styles and provided Pooya with practical tools for language development.

The literature supports the use of varied and authentic materials in language learning, as they offer learners opportunities to engage with the language in different contexts and formats. According to Tomlinson (2021), well-designed materials can enhance learners’ motivation and facilitate the development of language strategies by providing meaningful and contextualized language practice. This aligns with the experiences of the participants, who found that the diverse materials used in their classes supported their strategic development.

b) Impact on Learning Outcomes

The impact of materials on learning outcomes was evident in the improved performance of all participants. Leila’s increased scores were partially attributed to the effective use of visual aids and interactive exercises, which helped her retain and apply new language concepts (Leila, group interview). The materials provided her with the tools needed to develop and refine her language strategies.

Sara’s progress, as reflected in her rising scores, was also linked to the variety of materials she used. These materials not only enhanced her understanding but also helped her develop specific strategies for different language skills (Sara, focus-group interview). The practical and diverse nature of the materials contributed to her overall language proficiency.

Minoo’s improved reading skills, demonstrated by her higher scores, were largely due to her engagement with authentic materials. These materials provided her with practical examples of language use, which she could then apply in her own language learning (Minoo, focus-group interview). The real-world relevance of these materials was key to her strategic development and improved performance.

Pooya’s learning outcomes were similarly influenced by the use of multimedia and interactive materials. These materials helped him improve his listening skills, contributing to his overall language proficiency and higher scores (Pooya, group interview). The engaging nature of these materials played a significant role in his language development.

The positive impact of materials on learning outcomes is well-documented in the literature. Tomlinson (2021) and Ellis (2021) both emphasize that diverse and engaging materials can enhance

learners' motivation and provide practical opportunities for language practice, leading to improved language proficiency. The experiences of the participants in this study further underscore the importance of using a variety of materials to support strategic development and language learning success.

Link to Sociocultural Theory

The findings of this study highlight the role of sociocultural mediation in language learning. The teacher's use of eclectic methodologies, interactive tasks, and reflective practices created a sociocultural environment conducive to language development. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of ZPD, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and support in learning.

The study's findings also resonate with Storch's (2002) research on peer assistance, which underscores the cognitive benefits of collaborative learning. By pairing more capable peers with less experienced ones, the teacher facilitated a joint problem-solving context that contributed to learners' development and expansion of their ZPD.

Furthermore, the findings reflect Nunn's (2001) view that tasks serve as tools for recontextualizing the classroom for more meaningful learning. The language tasks used in this study acted as auxiliary means that helped learners regulate their behavior and explore different strategies for task performance. This approach not only facilitated language learning but also promoted a deeper understanding of language use in various contexts.

Conclusion

Overall, the analysis of mediating agents such as diary writing, the teacher, language tasks, L1, and materials highlights their critical roles in both the strategy development and learning outcomes of language learners. Each agent contributed uniquely to the learners' ability to engage with and master new language skills, ultimately leading to significant improvements in their language proficiency. The findings align with established literature on language learning, emphasizing the importance of reflective practices, effective teaching methods, diverse tasks, strategic use of L1, and varied materials in supporting successful language acquisition

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that sociocultural mediation plays a crucial role in language learning strategy development and proficiency. The teacher's use of eclectic methodologies, interactive tasks, and reflective practices created a supportive and dynamic learning environment that significantly impacted learners' language development. By bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application, the study highlights the importance of context-specific tasks, effective

scaffolding, and reflective practices in enhancing language learning. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how sociocultural factors influence language learning and offer valuable insights for educators seeking to create effective and supportive learning environments.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed significantly to the research process.

Declaration

We declare that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to any other journal for publication

Transparency Statements

The authors affirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Any additional data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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