Comparing language learning strategies among the more and less successful EFL learners in Iran

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Our study examined the language learning strategies of successful and less successful Iranian EFL learners. The sample comprised 1608 junior and senior EFL students who completed the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL), and 30 randomly selected participants in semi-structured interviews. The results from descriptive statistics revealed that: (a) Iranian EFL learners primarily used cognitive strategies while compensation and memory strategies were used the least; (b) successful learners preferred metacognitive strategies most and cognitive strategies least; (c) less successful learners benefited from cognitive strategies most, with minimal use of metacognitive and memory strategies; and (d) both successful and all learners were found to be medium strategy users though less successful learners reported lower strategy usage overall. Chi-square analysis results further highlighted significant differences between successful and less successful learners in their strategy use frequency.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, second language (L2) acquisition has evolved significantly, shifting from a teacher-focused model to a learner-centred approach (Bagheri et al., 2009). This change has also moved the focus from merely assessing language learning products to examining the *processes* involved in language learning (Oxford, 1990). Recent studies increasingly emphasise these learning processes, particularly language learning strategies, indicating an exciting and dynamic trend in the field (Wong & Nunan, 2011; Oxford, 2016).

Moreover, language learning strategies are crucial to language acquisition (Oxford, 2001). They enable learners to take charge of their learning process and manage the learning environment more effectively. These strategies help students become more autonomous and strategic in their approach to language learning. As Cohen (1998) noted, language learning strategies place the responsibility for learning on the learners rather than the teachers, promoting autonomy and independence. Thus, as a factor in individual differences, these strategies can help learners better use resources while fostering a sense of self-reliance and responsibility (Wong & Nunan, 2011).

Because of their significance, language learning strategies are frequently recognised as integral elements in different language proficiency theoretical models (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and as a critical factor in promoting student autonomy in language learning (Oxford, 1990). Allwright and Bailey (1991) further emphasised the importance of

language learning strategies, arguing that they help students become more self-reliant and develop into lifelong learners. These strategies promote learner autonomy and pave the way for a lifetime of learning, enhancing the teacher's role by empowering students to select and apply strategies that foster a sense of ownership over their learning process (Wenden, 1986). Along similar lines, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) asserted that skilled teachers play a vital role in raising students' awareness of the benefits of consciously applying language learning strategies, making the learning process faster and more efficient.

Conversely, language learning strategies are crucial in enhancing learners' communicative competence. Oxford (1990) considers these strategies valuable tools for building communicative skills and fostering active, self-directed participation in language learning. Given the critical role of language learning strategies in foreign language development, our study investigates the strategies (e.g., memory, cognitive, metacognitive, social, and compensation) utilised by both successful and less successful Iranian EFL learners. By exploring the reasons behind each group's strategy choices, this research offers valuable insights into how these strategies contribute to learners' success or challenges in acquiring a foreign language. This study's potential for personal growth and development may inspire less successful learners, guiding them toward adopting more effective strategies to enhance their performance in acquiring a foreign language.

Literature review

Theoretical framework of the study

Learning strategies

Learning strategies are defined as actions intentionally selected by learners to regulate and manage their learning process (Griffiths, 2008). Similarly, Ortega (2009) described language learning strategies as conscious mental and behavioural efforts that enable learners to monitor and assess their learning progress. What stands out from all the definitions of learning strategies, including those previously mentioned, is their focus on tools that enhance learning, aid learners in acquiring input more efficiently, and involve conscious effort. Facilitation in learning strategies is crucial, as it provides learners with the necessary support and guidance in their learning journey. Therefore, it can be argued that the core components of learning strategies are facilitation, effectiveness, and conscious awareness, which are the key takeaways from this discussion.

Our study seeks to build on earlier work using a similar mixed-methods design in the Iranian EAP context (Soodmand Afshar & Bayat, 2018), which examined the relationship between strategy use, learning styles, and L2 achievement.

Language learning strategies

Considerable research has investigated language learning strategies for acquiring a foreign or second language over the past three decades (Plonsky, 2011). Language learning strategies and process-oriented approaches gained prominence in the 1970s following the

paradigm shift in psychology and education from behaviourism to cognitivism. Moreover, Oxford (1990) defined language learning strategies as specific actions learners take to facilitate learning, making it faster, more enjoyable, self-directed, efficient, and adaptable to new information. This adaptability ensures learners can adjust their strategies as they encounter new information, providing a sense of reassurance and confidence. In a broader sense, Saville-Troike (2012) defined language learning strategies as the various behaviours and techniques learners utilise to acquire proficiency in a new language.

Oxford's classification of language learning strategies

In her classification, Oxford (1990) categorised strategies into two primary types: direct and indirect. Direct strategies involve actively using the foreign or second language during learning, engaging learners directly with the language. According to Oxford (1990), direct strategies require mental processing and direct engagement with the target language. They are categorised into three main types: memory, compensation, and cognitive strategies. Conversely, indirect strategies facilitate language learning without directly involving the language itself. These strategies focus on planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, managing anxiety, and most importantly, fostering cooperation and empathy, which are vital in building a supportive language-learning community. Indirect strategies are divided into three subcategories: metacognitive, social, and affective.

Recently, Oxford (2016) revisited her earlier taxonomy of learning strategy categories from 1990 and proposed a four-category model that includes cognitive, affective, sociocultural-interactive, and a primary category called "meta strategies," which encompasses metacognitive, meta-affective, and meta-sociocultural-interactive strategies. However, one issue with this taxonomy is that it lacks sufficient detail, as noted by Oxford (2016). This limitation is essential to remember as it can guide future research in the field. Additionally, the distinctions between different categories (such as affective and sociocultural-interactive) and especially among various subcategories (like metacognitive, meta-affective, and meta-sociocultural) may be unclear, making it challenging to apply this model in empirical studies on language learning strategies. Consequently, for our study we opted to utilise the original classification proposed by Oxford (1990).

Successful and less successful learners

Oxford (1990) suggested that successful language learners can manage their learning process by using metacognitive strategies, practising the new language through cognitive strategies, addressing learning or communication challenges with compensatory strategies, and regulating their emotions with affective strategies. This emotional regulation is a significant part of successful language learning, as it helps learners to stay motivated and engaged. They also collaborate effectively with peers or teachers by applying social strategies.

In contrast, less successful learners are identified as ineffective users of strategies, often holding negative attitudes and beliefs and lacking structured approaches (Oxford, 1990). Chamot (2004) noted that these learners occasionally utilise learning strategies as often as their more successful peers, but apply them differently. Thus, the difference between

successful and less successful learners is not based solely on how frequently strategies are used, but also on the types and quality of the strategies they choose to employ.

Previous research findings

Many studies have explored language learning strategies (LLS) adopted by learners. Kayaoglu (2013), for instance, investigated language beliefs and strategy use among 146 Turkish students comprising 60 successful and 86 less successful learners. The study revealed significant differences between the two groups in their perceptions of pronunciation, the importance of specific skills, and their understanding of language learning.

Similarly, Taheri et al. (2020) examined the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' LLS use and their achievement in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Their mixed-methods findings revealed notable differences in both the frequency and type of strategies used by high and low achieving learners, emphasising the importance of strategy training in enhancing skill development. In the same vein, high use of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies was found to improve speaking proficiency, particularly in terms of pronunciation, and confidence (Nandiah et al., 2025), while students with lower strategy use experienced anxiety and reduced fluency.

Furthermore, Zhang (2011) examined vocabulary learning strategies used by 120 Chinese non-English major primary students, categorised as good or poor learners. The study found that effective learners used a wider range of strategies, including dictionary use, encoding, perception, activation, management, and source strategies. In contrast, poor learners mostly relied on a bilingual pocket or electronic dictionary to look up new words. In another study, Quinto and Cacanindin (2024) developed the TELLS (Typology to identify English Language Learning Strategies) which was commonly used by Filipino university students. Their study highlighted intellective, affective, and productive strategy components, offering insights for language educators.

Similarly, Yippikun et al. (2025) found that Thai undergraduate nursing students used language learning strategies at a moderate level, with memory strategies being the most frequently employed. Significant differences in strategy use across proficiency levels were observed, along with a positive correlation between overall LLS use and writing achievement in English for Nursing Purposes.

In a separate study, Yeh and Wang (2004) examined vocabulary learning strategies among 271 senior university students in Taiwan. They found that cognitive strategies were the most commonly used, while social strategies were the least frequently adopted. Notably, significant differences were observed between successful and less successful learners: good learners preferred verbal repetition and contextual learning, whereas poor learners relied more on written repetition and learning words in isolation.

In addition, Anam and Stracke (2016) investigated the strategies used by 522 Indonesian EFL students using the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL). The participants reported high use of socio-affective and metacognitive strategies, while memory strategies were least favoured. The findings also indicated a significant difference in strategy use between students who were able to regulate their own learning using metacognitive strategies and those who were not. In a related study, Alfian (2021) explored the learning strategies used by 18 Indonesian EFL learners. Using qualitative interviews, the study found that participants predominantly used metacognitive strategies, reflecting a strong focus on self-regulation and learner awareness. Additionally, traditional strategies such as memorisation were emphasised as essential for developing English skills.

Wu (2008) investigated variations in LLS use between higher- and lower-proficiency Chinese EFL students. All participants commonly employed compensation strategies, but more successful learners used metacognitive, cognitive, and social strategies more frequently. The study underscored the critical role of strategic learning in achieving language proficiency. In a case study, Virgonita et al. (2021) examined the strategies used by six good and six poor EFL learners in an online class during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on questionnaire and interview data, the findings revealed that most good learners employed metacognitive strategies, while poor learners relied more on practical strategies.

Furthermore, Sun's (2024) study indicated the positive effects of metacognitive listening awareness and LLS use on reading comprehension among Chinese EFL learners, highlighting metacognitive regulation as a key contributor to academic achievement. Additionally, Wendaferew and Damtew (2023) found that explicit instruction in reading strategies significantly improved Grade 11 Ethiopian EFL students' reading comprehension, though no significant gender-based differences were reported post-intervention.

In the Iranian context, Riazi and Rahimi (2005) examined self-reported LLS use among 220 male and female Iranian EFL learners using the SILL. The study found that learners were generally moderate strategy users, with metacognitive strategies used relatively often. Cognitive, compensation, and affective strategies were applied at a moderate level, while memory and social strategies were the least used, suggesting potential areas for pedagogical support.

In another study in the EFL context of Iran, Ghavamnia et al. (2013) investigated variations in the types and frequencies of reading strategies used by 30 senior female English majors. Proficient readers mainly used cognitive strategies, while memory strategies were the least used among all participants. Proficient learners also reported using metacognitive strategies such as planning and self-questioning more often than less proficient learners, who tended to rely more on cognitive strategies, particularly translation.

Similarly, Soodmand Afshar et al. (2009) examined vocabulary learning strategies among 204 Iranian male and female English majors. Using a Likert-scale questionnaire, the study found significant differences between good and poor learners in the use of specific

vocabulary strategies. Oral repetition was widely preferred, and both groups were classified as medium strategy users.

Significance of our study and research questions

Numerous studies have explored the language learning strategies used by both successful/good and less successful/poor language learners, including several mentioned earlier in this study, particularly those conducted within the Iranian EFL context. However, the current study stands out in several ways. First, it is genuinely large-scale (N=1608), making the results potentially more generalisable to similar EFL contexts, particularly in Asia. Second, this study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, incorporating questionnaires followed by interviews which might enhance the study's reliability and external validity. Finally, identifying the language learning strategies used by successful learners, especially from such large-scale studies, could inform and equip curriculum developers, syllabus designers, materials writers, and EFL teachers with practical strategies to integrate into their work, ultimately fostering learner success.

While previous studies published in *Issues in Educational Research* (IIER) and other journals have focused primarily on EFL teaching in emergency contexts (e.g., during the Covid-19 pandemic), specific language skills, or teacher-related issues at the school level, few have investigated the large-scale, empirical examination of language learning strategy use among university-level EFL learners, particularly with a comparative focus on successful and less successful learners. Our study addresses this gap by investigating the strategy use of a large sample of Iranian EFL learners (N=1608), thereby contributing new insights to the broader field of strategy-based language learning. Thus, in light of the above argumentation, our study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the language learning strategies adopted by all Iranian EFL learners?
2. What are the language learning strategies adopted by successful Iranian EFL learners?
3. What are the language learning strategies adopted by less successful Iranian EFL learners?
4. To what extent do Iranian EFL learners use language learning strategies?
5. Overall, is there any statistically significant difference in the frequency of language learning strategies used by successful Iranian EFL learners and their less successful counterparts?
6. Are there any language learning strategies other than those stipulated in SILL adopted by the participants of the study?

Method

Participants

This study involved 1,608 junior (i.e., third-year) and senior (i.e., fourth-year) EFL students from various universities across the country, all pursuing a BA in English language. The BA/BSc program in the educational system of Iran normally takes four

years to be completed. The sample included 982 females and 626 males aged 21 to 36. Of these participants, 180 were classified as successful and 270 as less successful based on their grade point averages (GPAs). Students whose GPAs were more than one standard deviation above the mean were considered successful. In comparison, those whose GPAs were more than one standard deviation below the mean were categorised as less successful. Additionally, 30 participants were randomly selected for a semi-structured interview. Informed consent was obtained from all participants at both stages, and they were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of the findings.

Instruments

Strategy inventory for language learning (SILL)

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, version 7.0), developed by Oxford (1990), was used to assess the type and frequency of language learning strategies employed by the participants. This widely recognised instrument measures how learners use various strategies to enhance their language acquisition process. The SILL is a 50-item questionnaire encompassing six key components: cognitive, metacognitive, memory, social, compensation, and affective strategies. SILL has already been used and validated in various contexts, including Iran. Our previous work (Soodmand Afshar et al., 2009) has established the reliability of SILL in various contexts, and its reliability in the present study was estimated to be 0.81.

*Semi-structured interview*s

To explore the issues more thoroughly and obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the results, as well as to address the sixth research question of the study, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 30 randomly selected EFL students from the study's participants. Three experts in applied linguistics, all holding PhDs, reviewed the interview items to ensure validity. Based on their feedback, necessary revisions were made. Additionally, the participants were briefed and debriefed on the meanings of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to ensure clarity.

Grade point averages (GPAs)

The participants' total GPAs, whose data was gathered for all years of study to date, were obtained from their respective universities to distinguish between successful and less successful EFL learners. Students whose GPAs were more than one standard deviation above the mean (N=180) were classified as successful, whilst those with GPAs more than one standard deviation below the mean (N=270) were considered less successful. It is important to note that the GPA scale in the Iranian education system ranges from 0 to 20. The students in the average range were excluded to differentiate successful learners and ensure a safe margin regarding the classification.

Procedure

As stated earlier, the research was performed at multiple universities in different cities throughout the country with students majoring in English language. The whole data collection process (collection of both questionnaire and interview data) took nearly nine

months starting in mid April 2018 and ending in early 2019. The language of both the questionnaire and the interview was English. First, the SILL was distributed among the participants. Then, their GPAs to date were collected from their universities to specify the successful and less successful students based on a standard deviation of the GPAs, as explained earlier. Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was developed, and 30 EFL learners were randomly selected to participate in the interview phase of the study. Each interview lasted approximately five minutes and was audio recorded. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and analysed using content analysis.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data utilised both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequency analysis, were employed for the first, second, second, third, and fourth research questions. To address the fifth research question, a chi-square analysis was performed to compare the frequency of strategy use between the two groups of successful and less successful learners, as indicated in the questionnaire. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews related to the sixth research question were transcribed and subjected to qualitative content analysis, a crucial step that allowed the researchers to identify key themes and common response patterns (i.e., codes) for further examination. The codes were then 'quantitised' (Dornyei, 2007), subjected to frequency analysis, and tabulated.

Results

Questionnaire results

The first research question of the study that explored the language learning strategies used by Iranian EFL learners as a whole, was addressed using descriptive statistics, the results of which are summarised in Table 1. Only the findings for the five most frequently used and the five least frequently used strategies are included, for brevity.

Table 1: The five most and the five least frequently adopted language learning strategies by Iranian EFL learners overall (NT= never true of me; UNT= usually not true of me; ST= somewhat true of me; UT=usually true of me; AT=always true of me)

Item no. and title		NT		UNT		ST		UT		AT		M	SD
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
17	Writing notes, messages, etc. in English	162	10.1	432	26.9	333	20.7	220	13.7	461	28.7	3.24	1.37
21	Learning word meaning by dividing it into parts	189	11.8	406	25.2	304	18.9	243	15.1	466	29	3.24	1.4
12	Practising English sounds	212	13.2	413	25.7	233	14.5	289	18	461	28.7	3.23	1.43
16	Reading for pleasure	184	11.4	422	26.2	327	20.3	217	13.5	458	28.5	3.21	1.39
18	Skimming	193	12	434	27	301	18.7	254	15.8	426	26.5	3.18	1.39

9	Recall English words by remembering their location on the page, board, etc.	270	16.8	512	31.8	375	23.3	190	11.8	261	16.2	2.79	1.3
26	Making up new words	293	18.2	555	34.5	258	16	195	12.1	307	19.1	2.79	1.38
6	Using flashcards	313	19.5	481	29.9	344	21.4	193	12	277	17.2	2.78	1.35
5	Using rhymes	349	21.7	468	29.1	313	19.5	241	15	237	14.7	2.72	1.34
27	Reading without looking up every new word	326	20.3	530	33	282	17.5	212	13.2	258	16	2.72	1.35

As shown in Table 1, the five highest means were for item 17 (M=3.24), item 21 (M=3.24), item 12 (M=3.23), item 16 (M= 3.21), and item 18 (M=3.18), while the five lowest means were for item 27 (M=2.72), item 5 (M=2.72), item 6 (M=2.78), item 26 (M=2.79), and item 9 (M=2.79).

The second research question examined the language learning strategies employed by successful Iranian EFL learners. Descriptive statistics calculated for this purpose are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: The five most and the five least frequently adopted language learning strategies by successful Iranian EFL learners

Item no. and title		NT		UNT		ST		UT		AT		M	SD
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
35	Looking for people to talk to	4	2.2	6	3.3	19	10.6	55	30.6	96	53.3	4.29	0.94
37	Having clear goals for improving English skills	2	1.1	2	1.1	36	20	44	24.4	96	53.3	4.28	0.89
36	Reading extensively	2	1.1	8	4.4	26	14.4	55	30.6	89	49.4	4.23	0.93
34	Having good study time plans	1	0.6	5	2.8	31	17.2	59	32.8	84	46.7	4.22	0.86
38	Thinking about one's progress	1	0.6	11	6.1	29	16.1	51	28.3	88	48.9	4.19	0.95
23	Making summaries in listening and reading	56	31.1	80	44.4	35	19.4	6	3.3	3	1.7	2	0.89
20	Finding patterns	53	29.4	86	47.8	35	19.4	4	2.2	2	1.1	1.98	0.82
12	Practising English sounds	71	39.4	65	36.1	32	17.8	3	1.7	9	5	1.97	1.04
15	Watching TV shows in English	53	29.4	91	50.6	28	15.6	5	2.8	3	1.7	1.97	0.84
11	Talking like English natives	60	33.3	83	46.1	27	15	4	2.2	6	3.3	1.96	0.93

As indicated in Table 2, the five highest means were for item 35 (M=4.29), item 37 (M=4.28), item 36 (M=4.23), item 34 (M=4.22), and item 38 (M=4.19). The five lowest means, however, were for item 11 (M=1.96), item 15 (M=1.97), item 12 (M=1.97), item 20 (M=1.98), and item 23 (M=2).

The third research question investigated the language learning strategies less successful Iranian EFL learners utilised. Descriptive statistics are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: The five most and the five least frequently adopted language learning strategies by less successful Iranian EFL learners (NT= never true of me; UNT= usually not true of me; ST= somewhat true of me; UT=usually true of me; AT=always true of me)

Item no. and title		NT		UNT		ST		UT		AT		M	SD
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
18	Skimming	--	--	2	0.7	53	19.6	66	24.4	149	55.2	4.34	0.81
22	Not translating word-for-word	--	--	--	--	59	21.9	68	25.2	143	53	4.31	0.8
19	Looking for similar English words in one's own language	1	0.4	1	0.4	53	19.6	77	28.5	138	51.1	4.3	0.81
23	Making summaries in listening and reading	--	--	2	0.7	52	19.3	80	29.6	136	50.4	4.3	0.8
12	Practising English sounds	--	--	3	1.1	48	17.8	90	33.3	129	47.8	4.28	0.79
34	Having good study time plans	96	35.6	114	42.2	54	20	3	1.1	3	1.1	1.9	0.83
26	Making up new words	99	36.7	119	44.1	46	17	--	--	6	2.2	1.87	0.85
35	Looking for people to talk to	104	38.5	104	38.5	59	21.9	3	1.1	--	--	1.86	0.79
5	Using rhymes	108	40	101	37.4	57	21.1	4	1.5	--	--	1.84	0.8
4	Recall new English words by remembering their location on page, board, etc.	120	44.4	90	33.3	53	19.6	5	1.9	2	0.7	1.81	0.86

As shown in Table 3, the five highest means were for item 18 (M=4.34), item 22 (M=4.31), item 19 (M=4.3), item 23 (M=4.3), and item 12 (M=4.28). The five lowest means were for item 4 (M=1.81), item 5 (M=1.84), item 35 (M=1.86), item 26 (M=1.87), and item 34 (M=1.9).

The fourth research question explored the extent to which Iranian EFL learners utilised language learning strategies. Descriptive statistics are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics showing the extent to which EFL learners used language learning strategies

	Group	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std dev.
Language learning strategies	Successful	180	1	5	3.22	1.08
	Less successful	270	1	5	2.32	0.97
	All	1608	1	5	2.95	1.37

Oxford (1990) suggested a mean of 2.4 and lower for 'low', a mean range of 2.5 to 3.4 for 'medium', and a mean range of 3.5 to 5 for 'high' levels of strategy use. As shown in Table 4, successful learners in the study were found to be 'medium' strategy users (M=3.22, SD=1.08), while less successful learners were 'low' strategy users (M=2.32, SD= 0.97). Also, overall, Iranian EFL learners were found to be 'medium' strategy users (M=2.95, SD=1.37).

The fifth research question investigated whether there were statistically significant differences in the frequency of language learning strategy use between successful Iranian EFL learners and their less successful counterparts. Due to the violation of the assumption of normality of distribution, checked through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test (D (270) = .07, p= .001 and D (180) = .09, p= .001), the fifth research question of the study was answered through running a chi-square analysis. Table 5 reports the results.

Table 5: Chi-square analysis comparing the frequency of language learning strategies used by successful and less successful Iranian EFL learners (N=450)

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	366.11	51	.000
Likelihood ratio	478.18	51	.000
Linear-by-linear association	307.15	1	.000

As depicted in Table 5, the chi-square analysis results unveiled a statistically significant difference (Pearson chi-square=366.11, $p<0.05$) between successful and less successful Iranian EFL learners in their language-learning strategies. This finding has practical implications, suggesting that a higher frequency of strategy use could be a critical factor in the success of Iranian EFL learners.

Interview results

As previously mentioned, 30 participants attended semi-structured interviews to gather their insights on the use of language learning strategies and to address the sixth research question of the study. The participants were asked to describe their strategies and explain why successful and less successful learners tended to utilise metacognitive and cognitive strategies more frequently, respectively.

The first interview question explored the most frequently used language learning strategies, as identified in the SILL, among the participants. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: The interviewees' responses to the first research question of the interview (N=30)

Cognitive		Memory		Metacognitive		Social		Compensation		Affective	
f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%
11	36.7	6	20.0	5	16.7	4	13.3	3	10.0	1	3.3

As indicated in Table 6, 11 (out of 30, i.e. 36.7%) of the participants reported using cognitive strategies, while the least frequently reported was affective, only once (3.3%).

The second interview question investigated the language learning strategies (other than those mentioned in SILL) adopted by the interviewees, which was also the focus of the sixth research question of the study. Eleven interviewees responded. Table 7 lists these responses, paraphrased into a format comparable to the SILL items (Appendix A).

Table 7: Interviewees' responses to the second question of the interview

Kind of strategy
- When we have writing, I like to compare my writing with my friends.
- I search the Internet to learn new vocabulary.
- I sometimes try to learn the new vocabulary in dictionary, so I open the dictionary, choose the interesting words and memorise them.
- When I play video games, I read the subtitles.
- I check words written on people's clothes.
- While I am writing, I search the words on the Internet.
- I love to listen to English songs.
- When I see a word for the first time, I check it in a dictionary.
- I use some apps for learning vocabulary.
- I listen to English songs and try to write them down.
- I like to watch news and documentaries on TV shows and to play and pause them to learn new words.

The third question of the interview examined the respondents' perspectives on why successful learners were more likely to utilise metacognitive strategies. The results are presented in Table 8.

As indicated in Table 8, almost half of the respondents (46.7%) believed that successful learners could reflect on their thoughts, and 40% assumed that successful learners were conscious about their learning process. Some believed that successful learners were active in planning, controlling, and evaluating learning (30%) and were also able to have self-regulated learning (16.7%). These, they believed, were the reasons why successful learners adopted metacognitive strategies more often.

Table 8: Interviewees' responses to the third question of the interview (N=30)

N	Reasons	freq.	%
1	Successful learners have the ability to reflect on their thoughts.	14	46.7
2	Successful learners are conscious of their own learning.	12	40.0
3	Successful learners are active in planning, controlling, and evaluating their learning.	9	30.0
4	Successful learners are able to have self-regulated learning.	5	16.7

Note: Some interviewees mentioned more than one reason or theme for the third question of the interview, so the total for the frequency column exceeds 30.

The fourth interview question investigated the respondents' views on why less successful learners tended to employ cognitive strategies more frequently. The findings are summarised in Table 9.

Table 9: The interviewees' responses to the fourth question of the interview (N=30)

N	Reasons	freq.	%
1	Less successful learners lack awareness about their learning.	10	33.3%
2	Cognitive strategies are used most frequently by less successful learners because these strategies are limited to human cognition.	8	26.7%
3	Cognitive strategies are direct and easy to employ.	5	16.7%

Note: Seven interviewees offered no response to the fourth question of the interview, so the total for the frequency column is only 23.

As indicated in Table 9, the respondents believed the reasons why less successful learners employed cognitive strategies more frequently included lack of awareness about their learning (33.3%), these strategies being limited to human cognition (26.7%), and cognitive strategies being more direct and much easier to employ (16.7%).

Discussion

Our study examined the language learning strategies utilised by successful and less successful Iranian EFL learners. The first research question examined the strategies employed by all EFL learners in Iran overall. The findings showed that the five items with the highest mean scores were related to the cognitive strategy category. Conversely, three of the least frequently used items—specifically items 5, 6, and 9—were related to memory strategies, while items 26 and 27 pertained to compensation strategies. This suggests that Iranian EFL learners primarily favoured cognitive strategies, while they utilised compensation and memory strategies less frequently.

Supporting these findings, Yeh and Wang (2004), Ghavamnia et al. (2013), and others similarly reported that cognitive strategies were the most commonly used ones by EFL learners overall, including specifically Iranian EFL learners. Furthermore, the findings of the present study, which are also partially consistent with those of Riazi and Rahimi (2005), who found that memory strategies were the least utilised ones, contribute significantly to the existing knowledge on EFL learning strategies. In contrast to these

findings, Wu (2008) found compensation strategies to be the most adopted among Chinese students. This might imply that cultural factors and contextual issues could be involved in the discussion of the types of strategies language learners adopt and could thus call for more research in this respect. Corroborating this line of reasoning, Plonsky (2011) maintained that language learning strategy use and choice and its effectiveness are related to different contexts, treatments, outcomes, and aspects of study quality.

Moreover, the interview findings corroborate the questionnaire results in this respect because nearly 37% of the interviewees reported using cognitive strategies. For instance, one of the interview participants stated, 'When I learn a new word, I write it several times to understand.' Another participant pointed out, 'I like to read English books, but I check new words in a dictionary,' which are both instances of cognitive strategies.

One potential explanation for the participants' frequent use of cognitive strategies is their cultural background and their learning habits developed in school, which primarily involve note-taking, summarising, and practising to understand critical concepts. Another plausible reason why the learners favoured such direct strategies as cognitive strategies more, which has a close link with what was mentioned above, might be because these strategies seem to be highlighted more by schoolteachers because of the educational system of the country, which is traditional and teacher-orientated in nature. That is, as Soodmand Afshar et al. (2009) maintained, the educational system of Iran is traditional, non-active, non-participatory, atomistic, and individualistic, which might consequently encourage learners to use more direct ways of learning and strategies which are typically 'persisted by Asian students' (O'Malley, 1987, p. 141) that are mainly subsumed under cognitive strategies. Furthermore, memory strategies were identified as some of the least frequently utilised ones. This finding aligns with the results of Ghavamnia et al. (2013), who also observed that Iranian EFL learners preferred using memory strategies the least. This preference may be associated with the learners' proficiency levels. As Oxford (2003) argued, memory strategies do not include complex mental processes and might thus be preferred by less proficient and poor learners.

Additionally, the findings revealed that Iranian EFL learners used compensation strategies the least often. Oxford (1990) noted that foreign language learners utilise these strategies to tackle linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties. These strategies include various problem-solving techniques involving a range of mental or physical activities learners undertake. This suggests that compensation strategies may be among the most challenging to practise and teach, as they encompass various compensatory elements of learning. However, the potential benefits of compensation strategies for successful learners are intriguing, as they can significantly enhance language learning. This aligns with O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) assertion that compensation strategies are more advantageous for learners who have reached higher proficiency levels and for more successful learners rather than applying to all learners. Therefore, the reason why all Iranian EFL learners employed compensation strategies least frequently might be due to their complexity and multidimensionality.

Furthermore, the second research question explored the language learning strategies employed by successful Iranian EFL learners. The findings indicated that the metacognitive strategy subcategory had the highest means, whereas the cognitive strategies had the lowest. This finding, which has practical implications for language learning, aligns with the research conducted by Wu (2008), Zhang (2011), Riazi and Rahimi (2005), Ghavamnia et al. (2013), and Virgonita et al. (2021). These researchers found that successful and more proficient EFL learners tended to employ metacognitive strategies more often. According to Oxford (1990), metacognitive strategies encompass higher-order executive skills, including monitoring, planning, and evaluating a learning activity's effectiveness. These strategies involve advanced learning activities and thinking skills typically not characteristic of less successful learners.

Reflection might be another reason for metacognitive strategies being attributed to success in language learning. That is to say, one of the highest subcategories or skills of reflection is, in fact, metacognition (Akbari, 2007). Thus, because good/successful learners typically practise reflection more than their less successful counterparts (Soodmand Afshar et al., 2009), they are more likely to use metacognitive strategies. Similarly, Wilson and Cole (1991) argued that without reflection, learners may not know how to differentiate the application of various learning procedures and might thus fail to discern situations where specific strategies might be appropriate for the given task. This line of reasoning was also corroborated by the responses of the interview participants of the study, one of whom stated, 'metacognition is thinking about thinking' [i.e., reflection]. Similarly, another asserted, 'successful learners can think about what is taught' [i.e., reflect], which, naturally, helps in planning, organising, and monitoring their own thinking and learning.

Moreover, Anderson (2008) proposed a metacognition model comprising five critical learning components: preparing and planning for learning, selecting and utilising suitable activities, monitoring one's learning, orchestrating learning activities, and evaluating the overall learning process. This perspective suggests that metacognition has the potential to empower language learners by fostering critical thinking, reflection, and evaluation, which are essential for effectively managing learning and selecting appropriate strategies. Anderson (2008) argued that less proficient language learners often struggle to identify suitable strategies, resulting in their inability to become strategically competent users of metacognition.

The third research question examined the language learning strategies less successful Iranian EFL learners adopted. The findings showed that the highest five means were related to the cognitive strategies subcategory. However, among the five items receiving the lowest means, items 4 and 5 belonged to the memory strategies, items 34 and 35 were associated with the metacognitive strategies, and item 26 belonged to the compensation strategies. That is to say, less successful learners tended to adopt cognitive strategies most and memory, metacognitive, and, to some extent, compensation strategies least frequently.

The findings here align with those of Zhang (2011) and Ghavamnia et al. (2013), who found that cognitive strategies were the most frequently used by less proficient language

learners. Oxford (1990) explained that cognitive strategies actively work with incoming information, reshaping it to facilitate learning. Nevertheless, Brown (2007) highlighted the limitations of this type of strategy, arguing that cognitive strategies are often restricted to specific learning tasks and require direct manipulation of the material. This aspect makes them particularly applicable for less successful learners, who may find it challenging to approach learning tasks more indirectly. Corroborating this, one of the interviewees in the study mentioned that cognitive strategies are only limited to human cognition, and learners need to do something more to become competent learners. Learning to do something more to learn, we think, is the same as metacognition because metacognition helps learners plan, monitor, evaluate, etc., their learning.

Less successful learners were also found to use memory, compensation, and metacognitive strategies least frequently. This might be most plausible because these strategies are more complex and especially need much higher-order thinking skills, as mentioned earlier. Another reason might be that they are almost unfamiliar to the learners or have never used them. Therefore, Iranian EFL teachers should also highlight the importance of these strategies in their classes.

The fourth research question of the study explored the extent to which Iranian EFL learners utilised language learning strategies. The findings showed that both *all* learners and *successful* learners were categorised as medium strategy users. In contrast, *less successful* participants reported a relatively lower frequency of strategy use. These findings suggest that even successful Iranian EFL learners do not engage in high levels of strategy use, highlighting the need for training in use of various language learning strategies. However, this need for training should not be a cause for concern, as it aligns with the parallel study, which was part of this larger project that examined the effects of strategy instruction on EFL learners' L2 achievement, finding a significant positive impact (Soodmand Afshar & Bayat, 2021).

These findings follow those of Rahimi and Riazi (2005) and Soodmand Afshar and Bayat (2021), who also found that EFL learners, especially in Asian contexts, are medium strategy users. According to Cohen (1998), recognising the necessity of integrating language learning strategies is vital for syllabus design. However, many educators believe that simply following language materials and enforcing discipline will foster a conducive learning environment, a perspective that warrants careful reconsideration. Similarly, Cohen (2003) emphasised that learners should be instructed to personalise, practise, assess, apply, and transfer strategies to new learning contexts. This approach can enhance their autonomy and enable them to continue learning after leaving the language classroom.

The fifth research question of the study investigated whether there were statistically significant differences in the frequency of language learning strategy use between successful Iranian EFL learners and their less successful peers. The results indicated a notable difference between the two groups, a finding that aligns with the research of Yeh and Wang (2004) and Kayaoglu (2013), who also identified significant discrepancies in strategy use between successful and less successful learners. This underscores the importance of the research findings to the field of language education, particularly in the

training of struggling EFL learners, not only to increase their use of language learning strategies, but also to select strategies that are more effective for achieving success in language learning.

Finally, as the results of the sixth research question of the study indicated, some strategies (other than those stipulated in SILL) were adopted by the respondents, which included, among others, such strategies as 'searching the Internet to learn new vocabulary'; 'reading subtitles of video games'; 'searching the words on the net while writing'; 'using some apps for learning vocabulary'; 'listening to English songs and writing them down'; and 'watching news or documentaries on TV and playing and pausing them to learn new words'. This finding is in accordance with Alfian (2021), who also found watching TV/ English movies, memorising, and using the Internet useful in improving learners' English skills. This might show that some learning strategies, especially those related to technology, the Internet, apps, etc., are lacking in Oxford's SILL which might need revising and updating.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our study examined the language learning strategy use of both *all*, and *successful* as well as *less successful* Iranian EFL learners. As the results showed, both all and less successful EFL learners used cognitive strategies most frequently. However, successful learners adopted metacognitive strategies most frequently. Also, less successful learners were found to be low-strategy users compared to their successful counterparts, and all EFL learners were found to be medium-strategy users. Additionally, the interview findings revealed that the participants adopted some technology-based strategies, which were mainly lacking in Oxford's SILL.

The findings of this study have several important implications. First, EFL teachers, particularly those in Asia and specifically in Iran, should enhance their understanding of the differences between successful and less successful learners. This awareness is crucial for assisting less successful students in employing the strategies identified in this study. By doing so, these students could experience more effective language learning outcomes.

Second, given that the study's findings revealed that even successful learners did not extensively use strategies, it is recommended that all EFL learners, especially those who are less successful, receive explicit instruction on language learning strategies. This exposure would give them more opportunities to practise and refine various strategies. This assertion is supported by findings from a parallel study conducted by Soodmand Afshar and Bayat (2021), which demonstrated that explicit strategy instruction not only increased the frequency of strategy use among less successful learners, but also helped them adopt strategies more akin to those used by successful learners.

Third, we recommend that foreign language education policymakers, curriculum developers, syllabus designers, and materials writers integrate learning strategies, particularly those that have proven successful for learners, into their policies, curricula,

syllabi, and instructional materials. This approach would promote the active use of learning strategies among EFL learners and encourage teachers to explicitly teach these strategies to their students.

Fourth, because the findings of several studies indicate a close association between reflection and higher-order thinking skills and learning strategies like metacognition, as mentioned earlier, which was also found in the present study to be possessed and adopted mostly by successful learners, reflection needs to be given a serious second thought in Asian EFL contexts like Iran.

Furthermore, the findings from the sixth research question revealed that some participants employed language learning strategies not included in the SILL, primarily those associated with technology and technology-enhanced language learning. This suggests that the SILL may lack strategies related to computer-assisted language learning (CALL), mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), social media, and various language learning applications. Consequently, this indicates a need to revise and update the SILL to incorporate these technology-related language learning strategies.

Since we were not able to find a better and more comprehensive replacement, using SILL was another limitation of the study. However, as the interview results showed, SILL needs updating to include such strategies found in the interview that are not included in SILL (e.g., the use of recent technologies in language learning).

Another limitation of the study is that we were not able to control for students' previous experience using language learning strategies at the secondary educational level, which might have affected their choice of strategies at the tertiary educational level. Another limitation of the study is that the data were collected using self-report instruments (both SILL and an interview). To obviate this problem, further studies are recommended to use non-self-report instruments such as observation and introspective think-aloud protocols.

Lastly, given that this study was conducted with Iranian EFL students, the results may not be universally applicable to all EFL contexts across different countries, due to the context-specific and culture-specific nature of language learning strategies. However, there may still be notable similarities in language learning strategy choice and use among various EFL contexts, particularly in Asia. This suggests that there are still unexplored areas in the field. Additionally, this study relied on a self-report questionnaire (the SILL) and interviews to assess strategy use. It is clear that future research is crucial and should incorporate a broader range of methodologies, such as think-aloud protocols, observations, and dialogue journals, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of language learning strategies.

In addition to the limitations related to the use of the SILL instrument, it is important to acknowledge that language learning strategies represent only one aspect of the differences observed between the most successful and the least successful EFL learners. Other contributing factors—broadly categorized under support—may include academic tutoring provided by faculty members and student counselling services that address issues such as

financial aid, accommodation, mental health, and other personal challenges that could hinder academic performance, especially among less successful learners. Furthermore, although the concept of motivation was mentioned briefly in a cited reference, it was not directly examined in the current study. Therefore, future research is encouraged to explore the role of motivation, particularly in relation to learners' future career prospects, as a potential determinant of success in language learning.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the present study.

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Appendix A: SILL

Instructions: After reading each statement, check the numbers which indicate your opinion about the statement. Number meanings: 1=never true of me; 2=usually not true of me; 3= somewhat true of me; 4= usually true of me; 5= always true of me

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	I think of relationship between what I already know and new things I learn in English					
2.	I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.					
3.	I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.					
4.	I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.					
5.	I use rhymes to remember new English words.					
6.	I use flashcards to remember new English words					
7.	I physically act out new English words.					
8.	I review English lessons often.					
9.	I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.					
10.	I say or write new English words several times					
11.	I try to talk like native English speakers.					
12.	I practice the sounds of English.					
13.	I use the English words I know in different ways.					
14.	I start conversations in English.					
15.	I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English					
16.	I read for pleasure in English.					
17.	I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English.					
18.	I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.					
19.	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.					
20.	I try to find patterns in English.					
21.	I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.					

22.	I try not to translate word-for-word.					
23.	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.					
24.	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.					
25.	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.					
26.	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.					
27.	I read English without looking up every new word.					
28.	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.					
29.	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.					
30.	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.					
31.	I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.					
32.	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.					
33.	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.					
34.	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.					
35.	I look for people I can talk to in English.					
36.	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.					
37.	I have clear goals for improving my English skills.					
38.	I think about my progress in learning English.					
39.	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.					
40.	I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.					
41.	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.					
42.	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.					
43.	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.					
44.	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.					
45.	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.					
46.	I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.					
47.	I practice English with other students.					
48.	I ask for help from English speakers.					
49.	I ask questions in English.					
50.	I try to learn about the culture of English speakers					

Appendix B: Interview questions

1. What type of language learning strategies (out of SILL) do you use most? Elaborate please.
2. What strategies (other than those mentioned in SILL) do you use for learning English? Elaborate please.

3. The findings of our study showed successful learners use metacognitive strategies most. Why do you think it is so? Elaborate please.
4. The findings of our study showed less successful learners use cognitive strategies most. Why do you think it is so? Elaborate please.

Thank you very much

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