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Language learning strategies as predictors of L2 idioms production

The present study was an attempt to investigate types of language learning strategies as predictors of L2 idioms production. The participants were 112 male and female Iranian undergraduate B.A. and M.A. students majoring in TEFL, English Translation, and English Literature at the University of Qom; Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch; and Mofid non-profit University. Data were gathered through the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP), an idiom production test, and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and analysed using multiple regression analysis. The results showed that cognitive and affective learning strategies were the best predictors of L2 idioms production. In other words, cognitive and affective learning strategies together could account for approximately 35% of the total variance in L2 idioms production. These findings may have implications for language learners, teachers, researchers, syllabus designers, and materials developers. Since cognitive learning strategies were found to be the most commonly used strategies by successful idiom learners in this study, they should be taken into account more in L2 idiom production. At the same time, teachers should make learners aware of affective and social strategies because they have not received much attention in classrooms.

Keywords idioms, idioms production, language learning strategies

Introduction
Idioms are considered as an integral part of each language. Simpson and Mendis (2003) assert that learning a foreign language needs mastery of idioms of that language. Particularly, the English language is considered as a highly idiomatic and figurative language (Adkins, 1968). Those English learners who have difficulties in idioms production may fail to communicate effectively. Hossein, Khanji, and Makhzoomy (2000) argue that the ability to produce idioms is necessary for English language learners and is considered as one characteristic of advanced English language learners. The use of idioms must be considered as a part of communicative competence. Pollio, Barlow, Fine, and Pollio (1977), and Cooper (1999) also estimate that on average about four figurative expressions are produced in every minute of speech. Working from a similar point of view, Levorato (1993) and Levorato and Cacciari (1992)
coined the term “figurative competence” to focus on the production and comprehension of idioms. This type of competence refers to the ability to decode and encode figurative expressions. On the other hand, idioms are not defined clearly and comprehensively. This lack of clear and exact definition of idioms causes teachers and learners some difficulty dealing with idioms (Grant & Bauer, 2004). Idioms should be defined more clearly to remove this difficulty. Inoue (1986) defines an idiom as a conventionalised expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts. One clear, specific, and systematic definition is Fernando’s (1999, p. 38) definition that “conventionalised multi-word expressions are often, but not always non-literal”.

Another concern of the present study is language-learning strategies. Cohen and Weaver (1998) suggest that interest in language learning strategies started with the publication of papers mainly concerned with the “good language learner”. Consequently, language-learning strategies have become an integral part of various theoretical models of language proficiency (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Ellis, 1985). Language learning strategies are crucial because research suggests that training learners to use language-learning strategies can make them effective language learners. O’Malley and Chamot (1990) assert that these are special ways of processing information used by individuals to be able to comprehend, learn, or retain information better. One of the most comprehensive definitions, among many others, is proposed by Oxford (1990), based on which learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations. Griffiths (2004) offers language learning strategy theory, which asserts that other things being equal, the strategies which different learners use may account for at least part of their differential success rate.

Despite the importance of idioms in successful communication and the effectiveness of using language-learning strategies on L1 learning, there is a paucity of research on the effectiveness of language learning strategies in the production of L2 idioms. Besides, teachers have little information about which language learning strategies are effective and worth teaching to learners to enhance L2 idioms production. The purpose of the present study is to fill part of the existing gap in this area. It aims to investigate the contribution of language learning strategies to L2 idioms production.

**Review of literature**

Language users can make their speech more attractive, more effective, and spicier by making use of idioms. A model of idiom production has been suggested by Levelt and Meyer (2000), which is called the Superlemma model. Zarei and Rahimi (2012) define this model as a model that is based on the theory that idiomatic expressions are activated as superlemmas; then a superlemma activates its constituent single lemmas. To make it easier to digest, consider the following example: the concept *abandon somebody* activates the superlemma *leave somebody high and dry*
and this superlemma activates the lemmas (constituent parts) leave, somebody, high, and dry.

Moon (1996) and Mäntylä (2004) classify idioms into four major groups according to their level of lexical transparency or idiomaticity: transparent idioms, semi-transparent idioms, semi-opaque idioms, and opaque idioms.

On the other hand, language learning strategies have received more attention since focus shifted from teachers and teacher-centred classes to learners and learner-centred classes (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Brown (2007) points out that some learners are successful and others are not regardless of teaching methods. At the same time, it is undeniable that learners’ learning is influenced by their abilities, techniques, or strategies used during learning. However, not all types of language learning strategies are effective for all second language learners. Researchers attempt to discover which language learning strategies are used by effective second language learners. Successful language learners are also able to select and use strategies that are appropriate for doing the learning task (Vann & Abraham, 1990).

Oxford (1990) proposes a classification of language learning strategies containing six categories of L2 learning behaviours. Based on Oxford’s (1990) classification, language-learning strategies can be generally divided into two main categories:

**Direct Strategies**

Memory strategies refer to those strategies, which are used to help learners to store new information in memory and retrieve it when necessary.

Cognitive strategies refer to those strategies, which enable learners to understand and make a connection between new information and old information.

Compensation strategies refer to those strategies, which are used to compensate for lack of knowledge.

**Indirect strategies**

Metacognitive strategies refer to those strategies, which enable learners to control their learning.

Affective strategies refer to those strategies, which enable learners to control over their feelings, emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values.

Social strategies refer to those strategies, which are concerned with the interaction of learners with other people.

There is a wide variety of factors influencing the selection of language learning strategies. Among these, biological, cognitive, affective, socio-cultural factors, and also level of proficiency are strongly correlated with the selection of language learning strategies (Guilloteaux & Dömyei, 2008; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Oxford & Burry-stock, 1995).

Cooper (1999, p. 246) identified a number of strategies, used by learners to understand the meaning of L3 idioms, including the following: guessing from context, discussing and analysing the idioms, using the
literal meanings of idioms, using background knowledge, repeating or paraphrasing the idioms, connecting L2 idioms to L1 idioms, and other strategies like personal discussion and meta-analysis of the idiom. Cooper's results showed that guessing from context (28%) was mostly used by learners, which led to a correct answer 57% of the time. The least used strategy was referring to an L1 idiom (5%), which led to a correct answer 8% of the time. Based on Cooper's findings, it can be concluded that L2 learners used compensation and cognitive learning strategies the most.

On the whole, despite the relative plethora of research on various aspects of both idioms and language learning strategies, there seems to be a paucity of research on the direct relationship between language learning strategies and L2 idioms production. This study aims to bridge part of the existing gap. It attempts to investigate the relationship between language learning strategies and idioms and examine which learning strategies contribute best to L2 idioms production.

Method
Participants
The participants of the present study included 118 male and female Iranian B.A. and M.A. students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, English Translation, and English Literature at the University of Qom, Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch; and Mofid non-profit University. All of the participants were native speakers of Persian. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 30 years old. A general proficiency test (MTELP) was administered to homogenise the participants' level of English language proficiency. After the administration of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency and taking the results into account, the number of participants was reduced to 112. Six participants were excluded from the study because they had a different level of proficiency.

Instruments
To collect data for the present study and answer the research question, the following instruments were utilised:
a) Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP): In order to homogenise the participants, the vocabulary subtest of the Michigan test of English language proficiency was administered.
b) L2 idiom production test: In order to assess the participants' idiom production and their productive knowledge of idioms, a fill-in-the-blanks test containing 30 items of L2 idioms was used. All of the idioms used in this test were selected from the American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms. The Persian equivalent of the idioms was given in parentheses to help the participants to fill in the blanks.
c) Already established L2 idiom production test: Since the idiom production test was developed by the researcher, its validity had to be established. To this end, an already established L2 idiom production test was also used.
d) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0: In order to assess the general language learning strategies used by second language learners, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0
was used. SILL refers to a self-scoring questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990) based on her strategy taxonomy with 50 strategy items on a five-point Likert scale from 'Never' to 'Always'. It is worth noting that the most frequently used instrument for identifying language learning strategy use during the past decade has been SILL (Tseng, Dömyei, & Schmitt, 2006). A number of studies using SILL for collecting their data have found reliability indexes ranging from 0.91 to 0.95 (Oxford, 1996).

**Procedures**

The following procedures were followed to achieve the purpose of the present study. The procedures followed in this study were divided into five main stages. First, 118 participants majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, English Translation, and English Literature at the University of Qom; Islamic Azad University, Talesian Branch; and Mofid non-profit University were selected. In order not to make them confused and anxious, all the participants were informed about the purpose of the study.

In the second stage, the 40-item multiple-choice vocabulary subtest of the MTELP was used to make sure that there were no significant differences among the participants in terms of their vocabulary knowledge. The time allocated to this test was 45 minutes. Data from those who scored more than one standard deviation above or below the mean were excluded from all subsequent analyses. As a result, the number of participants was reduced to 112.

After excluding heterogeneous learners, the third stage began. The $L_2$ idiom production test was administered in order to collect data about participants’ productive knowledge of $L_2$ idioms. Participants were asked to take a 30-item fill-in-the-blanks test of $L_2$ idioms in 45 minutes. In this test, they were provided with the Persian equivalent of the idioms in parentheses to help them fill in the blanks. Then, in the next stage, an already established $L_2$ idiom production test was administered to check the validity of the newly developed test. The time allocated to this test was also 45 minutes.

At the end, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0 developed by Oxford (1990) was administered to collect data about types of second language learning strategies used by the participants. They were asked to choose from the five-point Likert scale for every statement from 'Never' to 'Always'. The collected data were organised and prepared for further statistical analyses.

Since the idiom production test was developed by the researcher, its validity and reliability had to be established. To this end, KR-21 formula was used to estimate the reliability of the test. The reliability index of the idiom production test turned out to be 0.93. A correlation procedure was used to check the validity, which the scores of the participants on the idiom production test were correlated with their performance on the idiom production test of which the validity was already established. The validity index of production test turned out to be 0.82.
Data analysis

To analyse the collected data and to answer the research question, the multiple regression analysis procedure was used.

Results and discussions

Results

The research question sought to investigate which types of language learning strategies are predictors of L2 idioms production. To answer this question, the multiple regression procedure was used. To do so, initially a correlation procedure was run to see the degree of the relationship between L1 idiom production scores and types of language learning strategies. It was found that L2 idioms production had the highest correlation with cognitive strategies (i.e., .552) and the lowest correlation with social strategies (i.e., -.058).

A stepwise multiple regression was run (Table 1), which showed that cognitive and affective strategies entered into the regression equation (stepwise criteria: probability of F <= 0.050).

Table 1 Variables entered/removed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables Entered</th>
<th>Variables Removed</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stepwise (Criteria: Probability-of-F-to-enter &lt;= .050, Probability-of-F-to-remove &gt;= .100).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the model summary (Table 2), it can be seen that cognitive strategies and L2 idioms production share 29% of the variance. Cognitive and affective strategies together share 35% of the variance with L2 idioms production. In other words, cognitive and affective strategies explain 35% of the total variance in L2 idioms production.

Table 2 Model summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjusted R² Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of estimate</th>
<th>Change Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R Square</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.552a</td>
<td>.305</td>
<td>.298 5.23631 .305 48.175 1 110 .000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.603b</td>
<td>.364</td>
<td>.352 5.03152 .059 10.137 1 109 .002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Predictors: (Constant), cognitive
b. Predictors: (Constant), cognitive, affective
c. Dependent Variable: Idiom production
The ANOVA procedure was used to test the null hypothesis that the predictive power of the models is not significant. The results of the ANOVA performed on the model are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 ANOVA on L2 idiom production test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>1320.905</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1320.905</td>
<td>48.175</td>
<td>.000a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>3016.086</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>27.419</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4336.991</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>1577.529</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>788.765</td>
<td>31.157</td>
<td>.000b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>2759.462</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>25.316</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4336.991</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Predictors: (Constant), cognitive  
b. Predictors: (Constant), cognitive, affective  
c. Dependent Variable: idiom production

Based on Table 4, significant results were shown. To see how strong the relationship between L2 idioms production and each of the six predictors is, the standardised coefficients and the significance of the observed t-value for each predictor were checked. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4 Coefficients of language learning strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardised Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardised Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (Constant)</td>
<td>-10.308</td>
<td>2.703</td>
<td>-3.814</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>.380</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.552</td>
<td>6.941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Constant)</td>
<td>-2.752</td>
<td>3.518</td>
<td>- .782</td>
<td>.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>.401</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.583</td>
<td>7.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>- .489</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>- .245</td>
<td>-3.184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dependent Variable: idiom production

Also based on Table 4, cognitive and affective strategies, among six types of language learning strategies, account for a statistically significant portion of the variance in L2 idioms production. Cognitive strategies are the best predictors of L2 idioms production; for every one standard deviation change in the cognitive strategies score, there will be .55 of a standard deviation change in idiom production score. Affective strategies are another predictor of L2 idioms production; every one standard deviation increase in one’s affective strategies score will cause .24 of a standard deviation decrease in one’s idiom production score.
These findings show that cognitive strategies are positive predictors and affective strategies are negative predictors of L2 idioms production.

Discussion

The present study attempted to investigate types of language learning strategies as predictors of L2 idioms production. One of the findings of the present study was that cognitive learning strategies were the best predictors of L2 idioms production. The participants employed more cognitive learning strategies for L2 idioms production compared to other categories of language learning strategies. This result is in line with that of Chanot and O’Malley (1987), Oxford (1990), Lachini (1997), Ehrman and Oxford (1995), Brennan (1999), and Khabiri and Azamnejad (2009), who argue that the most popular strategies with language learners are cognitive learning strategies. It also provides further confirmation for the finding of Cooper (1999), showing that L2 learners employed cognitive learning strategies to comprehend L2 idioms the most. The result of the present study also lends strong support to Hulstijn’s (1997), which argues that one learning strategy that might be worth applying to L2 idioms learning is the keyword technique. This technique is a kind of cognitive learning strategy, which refers to finding a link between the new word and some known words. The rationale for the frequent use of cognitive learning strategies by student to produce L2 idioms is that the keyword technique is effective for concrete words that create a visual image. Idioms often refer to some concrete events, which can be visualised.

However, this finding of the present study contradicts Park’s (1994) result, which revealed that learners minimally used cognitive learning strategies. The finding also differs from that of Takeuchi (2003), Vossoughi and Ebrahim (2003), and Rezaei and Almasian (2007), who found that metacognitive learning strategies were the most preferred.

Another result of the present study was that affective learning strategies were also a significant predictor of L1 idioms production. However, they had a significantly negative correlation with L2 idioms production. Moreover, the participants made use of affective learning strategies for L1 idioms production minimally. This finding corroborates the findings of Park (1994), Oxford and Ehrman (1995), Mochoizaki (1999), Wharton (2000), Vossoughi and Ebrahim (2003), Rezaei and Almasian (2007), Khabiri and Azamnejad (2009) that affective learning strategies were used the least.

There could be two reasons why learners used affective and social learning strategies minimally: first, L2 researchers may have used some methods to identify language-learning strategies that failed to measure learners’ affective and social learning strategies properly. Second, successful learners might hesitate to consider these as real strategies (Oxford, 2002). Another possible reason for these results is that many English language teachers were trained in the use of direct strategies such as cognitive strategies when they were younger learners; now they feel that these strategies require more emphasis than affective learning strategies.
Consequently, students are taught how to use cognitive strategies and are not well aware of affective learning strategies. Since the participants of the study were Iranian, one possible reason for these findings may be related to the Iranian educational system where classes are more teacher-centred. In these classes, students’ affective factors are not taken into account and direct strategies such as translating, analysing, or reasoning, which are categorised as cognitive learning strategies, are focused on more by teachers and students.

Unlike the above results, this study is not in line with some non-L2 research, which indicated that a number of the best learners used affective and social learning strategies (McCombs, 1988). The observed discrepancy between the findings of the present study and those of the above-mentioned studies could be partially attributed to the following factors. It is worth noting that the cultural differences might be one reason for differences between the results of the present study and the above studies. The participants of the present study were Iranian learners. Iranian learners are rarely given opportunities to raise their awareness of affective learning strategies. They do not feel comfortable discussing their feelings and attitudes with others. Moreover, Iranian learners are given little (if any) opportunity to take risks. As a result, they tend to learn language through practicing formulas and patterns. This reason lends a support to the present study in which cognitive learning strategies were used the most in L2 idioms learning.

The differences in the learners’ level of proficiency might affect language learning strategy use. In this study, the participants were intermediate level. As a result, they may not have been able to apply indirect strategies such metacognitive, social, and affective strategies. They may not have been proficient enough to self-monitor and self-evaluate.

Gender differences may be considered as another factor contributing to such differences in the findings. These differences were not taken into consideration in the present study although they might have affected the learning strategy use and choice.

One of the possible reasons that may justify why learners use cognitive strategies the most and affective learning strategies the least is that learners preferred to use more familiar strategies and had an inclination to avoid trying less familiar ones. On the other hand, in the Iranian learning context, cognitive learning strategies are more focused on at the expense of affective and social learning strategies. In addition, teachers usually provide learners with Persian equivalents of L2 idioms. It motivates them to use analysing, reasoning, transferring, and translating strategies. Iranian learners are also trained to summarise, take notes, and highlight important information. These strategies are mainly categorised as cognitive learning strategies.
Conclusion

The present study attempted to investigate types of language learning strategies as predictors of L2 idioms production. The multiple regression analysis indicated that cognitive and affective learning strategies were significant predictors of L2 idioms production. Participants who made more use of cognitive learning strategies had better performance on the L2 idioms production test. In other words, cognitive and affective learning strategies together could account for approximately 35% of the total variance in L2 idioms production.

This significant relationship can be accounted for on the basis of two considerations. First, cognitive learning strategies are direct strategies and involve the mental processing of language directly. Language learners need to have the direct mental processing of language to produce L2 idioms. Second, cognitive learning strategies include information processing strategies like analytic, bottom-up skills, and synthesising skills. They might be more closely related to L2 idioms learning (Tajeddin, 2004). In addition, based on the results of previous studies and those of the present study, strategies like reasoning, analysing, translating, and transferring, which are referred to cognitive learning strategies, help learners to produce L2 idioms better.

On the other hand, it can be concluded that affective learning strategies including strategies to control learners’ feelings (e.g., I feel relaxed when I cannot understand or produce L2 idioms) have a significantly negative correlation with L2 idioms learning. This is probably due to lack of awareness of these strategies on the part of the learners, which is in turn because the educational system focuses on the cognitive and metacognitive learning processes, and ignores the affective and interpersonal factors involved in the learning process. As a consequence, learners do not consider this category of language learning strategies as real strategies leading to successful learning (Rezaei & Almasian, 2007). Another possible reason is teacher-centred classes in which learners are not allowed to employ more affective learning strategies.

To sum up, the findings showed that language-learning strategies can be significant predictors of L2 idioms production. At the same time, the findings suggested that there are differences among the various language learning strategies as predictors of L2 idioms production. In the end, it is believed that language-learning strategies are a new area of research in English language learning and teaching (for example, Green & Oxford, 1995; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Oxford & Cohen, 1992). More research studies are required to explore the effectiveness of six categories of language learning strategies in different English language tasks.
For those who are interested in conducting research in this area, the following seven suggestions are made:

- Additional studies on the relationship between language learning strategies and L2 idioms learning should involve a sample larger than 118 participants included in the present study.
- This study used questionnaires to collect data about participants’ language learning strategies. Other studies might be conducted using other methods, such as think-aloud techniques, observations, and interviews.
- The number of items in the L3 idiom production tests was 60. Other studies can include a larger number of test items.
- Since this study did not aim to investigate the age and gender of the participants, which could be important independent variables, other studies might take these independent variables into consideration.
- The level of proficiency of the participants in the present study was intermediate; additional studies can replicate the study with participants at different levels of proficiency.
- Since different ethnic and cultural groups use different patterns of language learning strategies to produce L3 idioms, further research is needed with participants from other cultural backgrounds.
- More research is needed to investigate the effect of integrating learning strategies into classroom instruction.

References