Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Vocabulary Inferencing Strategies: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract—The present qualitative and interpretative study aims to investigate Iranian EFL learners' L2 vocabulary strategies. The distribution of strategy types and what factors contribute to the success of the inferencing strategies are the two main purposes of the study. Using think-aloud procedures with 15 Iranian EFL learners, the present study explored L2 learners' inferencing strategies and the relationship with their success. Sixteen types of inferential strategies were revealed to be employed by the participants and two types of inferences were identified: successful and less successful inferences. The results of the study are discussed in the light of the similar studies and the suggestions for future research are made. The study has a number of pedagogical implications for L2 research and practice, L2 teachers, syllabus designers, and educational psychology.

Index Terms—L2 vocabulary learning, lexical inferencing strategies, L2 teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary development is an essential part of second language (L2) acquisition (Laufer, 1992; Nation, 2006; Schmitt, 2008; Yousefi, 2015; Yousefi & Biria, 2015, 2016). There is a general consensus in the field of SLA that lexical inferencing (LIF) is among the most commonly used techniques that L2 learners use to generate meaning for unknown words they encounter in context (Deschambault, 2012).

Learner's knowledge of efficient strategy use in lexical inferencing research has been presumed to be a determining issue for learner's vocabulary learning achievement (Nassaji, 2004). Some studies centered on the signs apply in lexical inferencing (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999); whereas other studies reveled the achievement speed of lexical inferencing (Bengeleil & Paribakht, 2004). When sufficient signs are accessible in the context, learner's L2 ability is one of the important things to proper signs employ and successful meaning construction for new words. This has been confirmed by the studies on the relationship among learner's lexical inferencing success and their vocabulary size, or the width of vocabulary knowledge (Laufer, 1997) and the depth of vocabulary knowledge (Qian, 1999).

Literature Review

Lexical inferencing means "making informed guesses as to the meaning of a word, in light of all available linguistic cues in combination with the learner's general knowledge of the world, her awareness of context and her relevant linguistic knowledge" (Haastrup,1991, p. 40).Over the past decades, researchers have spent considerable amount of time theorizing and exploring what successful language learners do and what strategies they employ in the process of acquiring a second language (Hu & Nassaji, 2014). A word with a derived meaning is more likely to be retained in an L2 lexical system than a word with a glossed meaning (Nation, 2001). Recently, there has been an increased research interest in the infenceing strategies of L2 learners and factors affecting the use and success of them (Hu & Nassaji, 2012 ; Nassaji, 2003, 2004; Nassaji & Hu, 2012; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Wesche & paribakht, 2010). Research also indicated that lexical inferencing was widely used by L2 learners when dealing with unknown words in their reading (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Parry, 1993). Lexical inferencing has also been found to be closely associated with incidental vocabulary learning (Nagi, 1997).

Besides, a number of researchers (e.g., Coady, 1993; Stein, 1993) claim that inferring word meaning from context is often an unreliable method of vocabulary learning. For instance, Ko (2012) argues that due to their lack of vocabulary knowledge or proficiency level, L2 learners cannot make intelligent guesses In the same manner, Nagy (1997) believe that learners must know the majority of the vocabulary in any text to be able to guess the meanings of unknown words successfully. As stated by Ko (2012), guessing unknown words would be more problematic in the case of L2 beginners whose overall L2 knowledge is limited.

Hu and Nassaji (2014) have determined several important characteristics of successful inferencers included frequent use of evaluation and monitoring strategies, a combination of both textual and background knowledge, self-awareness, and repeated efforts to infer the target word meanings. Advanced vocabulary knowledge necessitates knowledge of lexical knowledge (Meara & Wolter, 2004) and also involves understanding the affect or attitude conveyed by different word choices (Qian, 1999). Additionally, Corrigan (2007) posited that the notion of vocabulary depth is important

because it has been shown to make a unique contribution (i.e., beyond vocabulary breadth in predicting reading comprehension (Qian 1999).

In the same way, Nassaji (2006) examined the relationship between English as a second language learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge, their lexical inferencing strategy use, and their success in deriving word meaning from context. In this study, participants read a passage containing 10 unknown words and attempted to derive the meanings of the unknown words from context. Introspective think-aloud protocols were used to discover the degree and types of inferencing strategies learners used. Nassaji found that the stronger students made more effective use of certain types of lexical inferencing strategies than their weaker counterparts. And depth of vocabulary knowledge made a significant contribution to inferential success over and above the contribution made by the learner's degree of strategy use. Nassaji provided empirical support for the centrality of depth of vocabulary knowledge in lexical inferencing.

Nassaji (2006) also lend countenance to the hypothesis that lexical inferencing is a meaning construction process that is significantly influenced by the richness of the learner's preexisting semantic system. To make successful meaning inferences , learners not only need to be attentive to the functions and meanings of affixes, but should be able to integrate structural (morphological structure) and contribution of morphological awareness and lexical inferencing ability semantic (morpheme meaning) information of each target word (Zhang & Koda, 2012).

In their mixed design, Hu and Nassaji (2014) explored L2 learners' inferential strategies and the relationship with their success. Twelve types of inferential strategies were found to be used by all the learners, and two groups of learners were identified: successful and less successful inferencers. The results of the study confirmed a number of differences between successful and less successful inferencers which pertained to not only the degree to which they used certain strategies but also when and how to use them successfully. Research (Nassaji, 2004; Haastrup, 1991; Wesche & aribakht, 2010) has also found that learners' knowledge of effective strategy use is a determining factor for learners' vocabulary learning success.

Most significantly, Kintsch (2004) argued from a psycholinguistic view that an inferencer must build a situation model, in which the information is provided by the text and the schemata. Kintsch proposed that there are at least two ways in which the meaning selection could occur: one is that the schema acts as a filter in a top-down manner and the other is that the meaning selection takes place in a bottom-up manner. In the former case, the context suppresses irrelevant information due to its mismatch with the contextual meaning (P.28). To sum up, Nassaji and Hu (2012) concluded that task-induced involvement had significant effects on the use of lexical inferencing strategies and word retention.

II. METHODOLOGY

Iranian EFL learners are rarely taught L2 vocabulary inferencing strategies at schools and universities. Deriving the meaning of unknown words from context is a demanding challenge for Iranian EFL learners. Accordingly, they have difficulty in understanding, reading and deriving the meaning of unfamiliar words from context. Another problem is that we as language teachers do not have knowledge whether Iranian EFL learners employ a repertoire of inferencing skills or not.

The purpose of the present study is to determine different types of L2 lexical inferencing strategies that Iranian EFL learners employ for deriving the meaning of unknown words from context. Another purpose is that to determine factors hinder Iranian EFL learners to successfully derive the meaning of unknown words within context. Finally the study aims to determine factors contribute to the difficulty of L2 vocabulary inferencing among Iranian EFL learners.

As (Bengeleil & Paribakht, 2004; Nassaji, 2004) stated that although many studies of lexical inferencing have been took out in the context of English as a secondary language with their participants from varied language and cultural backgrounds, there are limited studies aiming to discover lexical inferencing in the context of English as a foreign language with all participants distribution one particular language and culture.

Research Question
The following question is addressed in the present study:
1. What types of L2 lexical inferencing strategies do Iranian EFL learners employ deriving the meaning of unknown words from context?

Participants
The Participants of the present qualitative study were 15 Iranian EFL learners (11 female and 4 male), aged between12-30(mean=18) who had been in intermediate level of Engl;ish proficiency. The participants were from private language institute in Miyandoab, Iran. They had different L1 background including; Azarbayjani Turkish, Persian and Kurdish. The class met three times a week. The focus was on reading book. All of participants volunteered for the study. The participants were told that the results of the study had nothing with their final exam scores. All the participants achieved a satisfactory threshold level to be able to infer the meaning of unknown words.

Materials
A reading passage was selected as a means of data collection. Ten words were selected as the target words and highlighted in bold fonts in the text .The target words were chosen from content words and low frequency words. The content words were considered significant for understanding the main ideas of the text. In order to make sure that the

target words were unknown by the participants, the pilot study was conducted with five learners. Those words that were known by these learners were replaced with other target words.

Procedure

The participants were received a target text with target words bold in it. They were asked to read the text for comprehension and to infer the meaning of the target words from the context. They were asked to verbalize what they would be thinking aloud to passage while inferring the target words. They were asked to think-aloud by reporting their thoughts when they inferring the meaning of the words. They were permitted to do the think-aloud in the language they felt most relaxed with it (either their own L1 or English). Afterwards, the learners were then given a test of five multiple-choice comprehension questions. They had been given 5-10 min to answer the comprehension tests. The aim of giving a reading comprehension test was to make sure that the participants read the text for comprehension while inferring the target words. After transcribing think-aloud protocols, they were translated to English.

Data collection

Concurrent think-aloud protocols were collected from the participants while they were engaged in lexical inferencing task. The protocol was employed since it was thought that some part of the information might be missing while participants were producing verbal reports. After data collection, data were transcribed by the second researcher. Then, the data were codified inductively. The researchers analyzed the data by going from examples to the main taxonomy of the Lexical Inferencing Strategies by Iranian EFL learners. Based on the reading of the transcriptions, a coding scheme was designed. The strategies recognized were refined based on the subsequent readings of the transcriptions of the think-aloud data. Firstly, sixteen types of inferential strategies were recognized. These strategies were as follows: analyzing, associating, repeating, using textual clues, using prior knowledge, paraphrasing, confirming-disconfirming, stating failure, reattempting, analyzing + using textual clues, associating + using textual clues, analyzing + paraphrasing, associating + using prior knowledge, making inquiry + stating the failure, analyzing + stating the failure, analyzing + confirming-disconfirming. These strategies then regrouped into eight major categories: Form-focused, Meaning-focused, Evaluating, Monitoring, Form-focused + Meaning-focused, Evaluating + Monitoring, Form-focused + Monitoring, Form-focused + Evaluating strategies.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSES

TABLE 4.1.
FREQUENCY OF EACH STRATEGY TYPE ALONG WITH CORRECT AND INCORRECT INFERENCES

	Frequency	Strategies	Frequency	Partially correct	Correct	Incorrect	Sum	Mean
Form-focused	49	Analyzing	13	1	11	1	13	6.5
		Associating	35	6	28	1	35	17.5
		Repeating	1	0	0	1	1	0.5
		Total	49	7	39	3	49	24.5
Meaning-focused	71	Using textual clues	40	4	26	10	40	20
		Using prior knowledge	18	2	15	1	18	9
		Paraphrasing	13	1	3	9	13	6.5
		Total	71	7	44	20	71	35.5
Evaluating	5	Confirming-disconfirming	5	2	2	1	5	2.5
		Total	5	2	2	1	5	2.5
Monitoring	2	Stating the failure	1	0	0	1	1	0.5
		Reattempting	1	0	1	0	1	0.5
		Total	2	0	1	1	2	1
Form-focused + Meaning-focused	14	Analyzing + Using textual clues	5	0	5	0	5	2.5
		Associating + Using textual clues	2	1	1	0	2	1
		Analyzing + Paraphrasing	6	2	3	1	6	3
		Associating + Using prior knowledge	1	0	1	0	1	0.5
		Total	14	3	10	1	14	7
Evaluating + Monitoring	1	Making inquiry + Stating the failure	1	0	0	1	1	0.5
		Total	1	0	0	1	1	0.5
Form-focused + Monitoring	1	Analyzing +Stating the failure	1	0	0	1	1	0.5
		Total	1	0	0	1	1	0.5
Form-focused + Evaluating	1	Analyzing + Confirming-disconfirming	1	0	1	0	1	0.5
		Total	1	0	1	0	1	0.5
No strategy	6	No strategy	6	1	0	5	6	3
		Total	6	1	0	5	6	3
		Sum	150	20	97	33	150	
		Total Mean	16.67	2.22	10.78	3.67	16.67	

Table 4.1. shows the each strategy type along with it sub-strategies. As it is evident meaning-focused strategies are the most frequently strategies with form—focused ones following them. However, as far as the success of inferences is concerned, form-focused strategies have triggered the most correct inferences on the part of the participants.
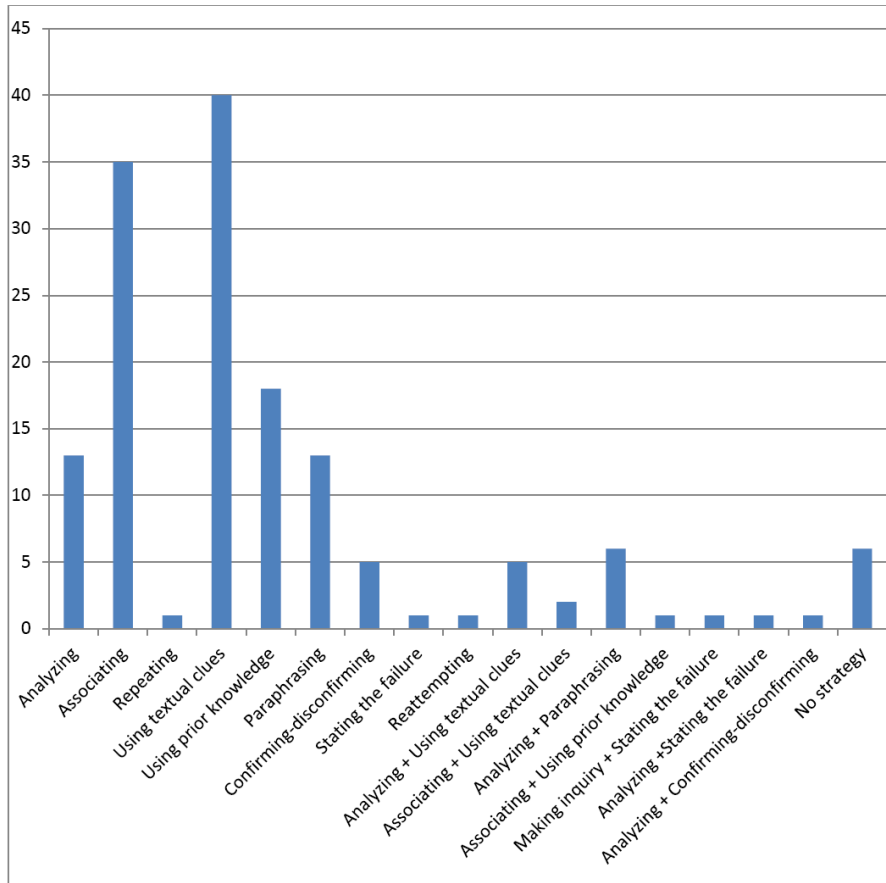
Figure 4.2 the mean for all strategy types

Figure 4.2 demonstrate mean for all strategy types that employed by learners. For example the highest mean belongs to using textual clues (it is 20). And the least mean for repeating, stating the failure, reattempting, associating + using prior knowledge, making inquiry + stating the failure, analyzing + stating the failure, analyzing + confirming-disconfirming, it is 0.5.
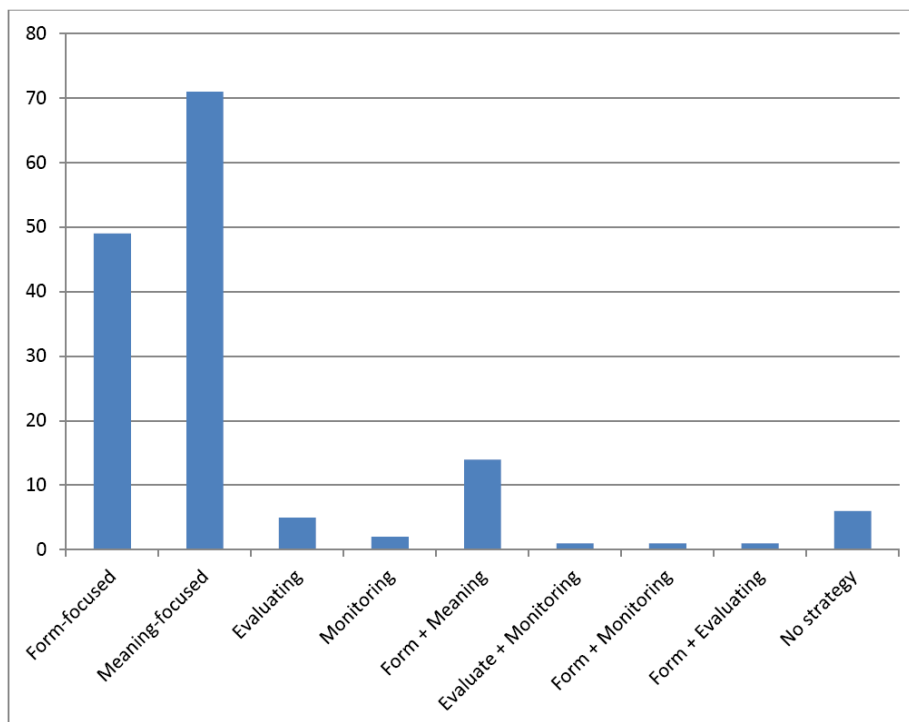

Figure 4.3 Figure for main strategies that used by participants

Figure 4.3 demonstrates that participants used 71 times Meaning-focused strategies. It is the most frequently strategy type. This figure also demonstrate that Evaluating strategies + Monitoring strategies, Form-focused strategies + Monitoring strategies, Form-focused strategies+ Evaluating strategies used less frequently by participants 1 time. In this figure there is no strategy. Participants guess the meaning of words 6 times with No strategy, they just say the mean for words.

IV. Discussions and Conclusions

The present qualitative and interpretive study sought to investigate Iranian EFL learner's use of different types of lexical inferencing strategies in order to derive the meaning of unknown words from context. The results of the present study revealed that Iranian EFL learners have a rich repertoire of strategies to infer the meaning of the unknown words. They simultaneously employed more than one strategy (e.g Form-focused strategies + Meaning-focused strategies).

The findings suggest that meaning-focused strategies were the most commonly used strategies that Iranian EFL learners employed deriving the meanings of unknown words. This can be attributed to the fact that the participants most frequently relied on using contextual clues, both linguistic and non-linguistic, their prior knowledge and paraphrasing.

The findings also give countenance to the fact that successfully applying prior knowledge to making meaning out of the reading task and deriving the meanings of unfamiliar words should be encouraged by the language teachers. Furthermore, to drive the meaning of unknown lexical items in reading task, L2 learners should be taught strategies to capitalize on textual clues. They also should be made aware of the different part of speech, discourse markers, synonyms, antonyms, and elaboration techniques employed by authors.

Among most frequently used strategies are form-focused strategies. Associating is the first and foremost strategy on this regard. The participants employed it about three times more than analyzing and 11 out of 13 strategies were successful. This might be attributed to the fact that associating has saliency among cognitive tasks and hence the participants have propensity to apply the strategy more than the other strategies. It is recommended that language teachers emphasize the strategy teaching reading skill.

That is because they guess, they think. One of the contributes of the present study is to highlight (no strategy use) in the current study sometimes participants report using any strategy. That is because many teachers don't teach strategies.

The results of the present study demonstrate that Iranian EFL learners, under some circumstances, simultaneously employed more than one strategy type. They tend to utilize Meaning-focused Strategies (using contextual clues) than any other strategy type. It might be because of the fact that the participants read the text for comprehension purpose. Although participants simultaneously used both strategy types (e.g Analyzing + Paraphrasing), but a small number of participants employed these strategies. I think because they didn't know the strategies and didn't know how they used these strategies.

Pedagogical Implications

The present study has a number of pedagogical implications for syllabus designers, language teachers, curriculum developers and applied linguistics. It is suggested that language teachers should incorporate teaching inferencing strategies in teaching reading courses. Due to the fact that the lexical items which once successfully inferred will have greater chance of retention and recall, it is strongly recommended that L2 learners encouraged to infer the meaning of unknown words in the first place.

Limitations of the study

The present study has a number of limitations that should be confessed. First, the study was conducted with small number of the participants. Thus future studies are suggested to be done with a large number of the participants. Second, the participants were intermediate EFL learners. Caution should be exercised since advanced learners may have difficult patterns and reports of vocabulary unfencing strategies.

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