

The Relationship between Locus of Control and Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to explore the possible relationship between EFL learners' psychological orientations manifested in the dichotomous categorization of internal and external locus of control with the strategies they use for learning vocabulary. Also, attempts were made in order to explore any regular patterns which would decide for male and female EFL learners to be put into either internal or external groups in terms of their LOC and vocabulary learning strategies. To this end, Rotter's Locus of Control Scale (1966) and a questionnaire adapted from Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire of Li (2004) were distributed among 74 students selected from junior students of English Literature at University of Kashan and AllamehTabataba'i University (51 females and 23 males). Pearson product moment correlation and independent samples t-test were used for data analysis. EFL learners' locus of control (LOC) and their use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) were found to have an insignificant correlation with each other. It was also found that there was no significant difference between male and female participants in terms of their locus of control and their use of vocabulary learning strategies.

Keywords: locus of control, vocabulary learning strategies, EFL learner

1. Introduction

Having a good command of a foreign language to a great extent depends on expanding considerable knowledge of vocabulary and consequentially finding efficient and practical strategies with which language learners can enlarge their vocabulary range is a serious concern to language teachers.

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While lack of profound knowledge in grammar may not result in breakdown in communication, without vocabulary we convey nothing (Lewis, 1997). Rahimi and Sahragard (2008) held that formal instruction is regarded as the main and primary source of input in the foreign language settings and accordingly special attention must be given to presenting, practicing, and producing new vocabulary items. In this regard, a crucial step which should be taken in improving foreign language learners' learning of new vocabulary is their familiarity with and frequent use of different vocabulary learning strategies which are in line with their psychological orientations and can help them meet their learning and real-life needs.

Given that vocabulary has gained considerable currency and interest in language learning and teaching, VLSs are considered important in helping language learners to develop their vocabulary knowledge (Schmitt, 2000; Takac, 2008). It is believed that learning strategies including VLSs play a significant role in vocabulary acquisition. Ellis (1994) maintained that strategic instruction is beneficial for learners and VLSs can promote explicit vocabulary learning by helping the learners to notice new vocabulary items and store them into long-term memory. O'Malley et al. (1985) found that language learners used learning strategies in vocabulary learning more frequently than in other aspects of language learning activities. Thus, it is crucial that language learners be made aware of helpful and efficient strategies so that they can freely and consciously choose the one(s) suitable for them. According to Nation (2001), language learners can develop a large vocabulary items with the help of VLSs. Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p. 291) found that VLSs were associated with "learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction". However, the finding of studies indicated that a strategy that works well for one student may completely fail with another (Dörnyei, 2005). As such, language teachers should consider and further devote special attention to the individual differences among the learners in order to create the most effective instructions (Oxford & Ehrman, 1993).

Reporting on three studies of VLSs, (Takac, 2008) concluded that "vocabulary learning strategies are highly idiosyncratic and need to be regarded accordingly" (p. 150) and suggested that future studies need to address the extent to which strategies are influenced by personality traits and cognitive and linguistic development. Generally speaking, awareness of individual differences in the learning process results in teachers' better understanding of learners' psychological orientations and learning styles. Examples of individual differences encompass aptitude, intelligence, cognitive styles and learning strategies, gender, age, and personality (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Among these factors locus of control (LOC) that is cognitive in nature has attracted considerable attention during the past two decades (Ghabanchi & Golparvar, 2011).

The concept of LOC is closely associated with attribution theory whereby the causes of the events can be expounded (Jarvis, 2005). Those identified with an external attribution tend to believe that some external factors motivate a given event. By contrast, an internal attribution assigns causality to factors within a person rather than environmental ones (Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003). The researchers found that internals tended to persist and successfully complete the task they were engaged in whereas externals eschewed performing the particular learning task and preferred to work on other tasks (Kernis, 1984; Lonky & Reiman, 1980).

Despite the fact that a great deal of research was carried out on the relationship between LOC and academic achievement (Gifford, Briceno-Perriott, & Mianzo 2006; Hadsell, 2009; Wood, Saylor, & Cohen, 2009), scant attention has been paid to the investigation of LOC in the EFL context of Iran (Ghabanchi & Golparvar, 2011). Ghonsooly and Elahi (2010) found a significantly positive relationship between the university students' LOC and their General English achievement course. Further, investigating the relationship between LOC and L2 reading achievement and use of language learning strategies, Hosseini and Elahi (2010) found that EFL learners identified with internal LOC used metacognitive strategies more frequently than those with external LOC. Talebi Hemmat and Rahimi (2012) conducted a study to determine the relationships between locus of control (LOC) orientation and high school student's language achievement. They found a significant relationship between locus control and achievement of high school students.

In the same vein, Yazdanpanahm, Sahragard, and Rahimi (2010) found that the locus of control orientation and socio-economic status had significant relationships with the academic achievement of university EFL students; that their academic achievement can be significantly predicted by their locus of control scores; that the internally oriented students performed at higher levels of achievement than the externally oriented students; and that the internal students' grades for general and major courses had significant relationships with their locus of control scores.

2. Justification of the Study

A highly important factor involved in learning every foreign language is the amount of vocabulary learners possess, since vocabulary is one of the greatest parts that shape every language. How second language learners acquire this vocabulary and how the process of learning vocabulary can be adjusted so that they are more successful in the learning are of great importance in the field of second language learning. In this regard, a crucial step which should be taken in improving second language learners' learning of new vocabulary is their familiarity with and frequent use of different vocabulary learning strategies which are in line with their psychological orientations and can help them meet their learning and real-life needs.

However, to the best of researchers' knowledge, there is a dearth of research on the possible relationship between LOC and VLS. The main objective directing this study is to explore the possible relationship between students' psychological orientations manifested in the dichotomous categorization of internal and external locus of control with the strategies they use for learning vocabulary. From among the factors leading to vocabulary learning problems, one can think of the different psychological orientations that exist among students. Students with different psychological orientations (e.g. internal vs. external locus of control) may benefit from vocabulary acquisition strategies differently. It seems that the degree to which learners have an external or internal locus of control affects the type of vocabulary learning strategies they use in the process of learning new vocabulary and the extent to which they may lead to success or failure. In effect, this study set itself the objective of exploring adequate answers to the following questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' LOC and VLSs they use?
2. Is there any significant difference between VLSs used by male and female EFL learners?
3. Is there any significant difference between male and female EFL learners' LOC?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A sample of 74 (51 females and 23 male) junior students of English Literature at Kashan University and Allameh Tabataba'i University took part in the study. The age of the students ranged from 19 to 25 years.

3.2 Instruments and Data Collection Procedure

Two questionnaires were used to collect the data. The Locus of Control Scale adopted from Rotter (1966) was used to measure the participants' LOC. The scale includes 29 items that gauge the participants' generalized expectations concerning where control over subsequent events resides. To tap into the participants' VLSs, a used was made of a 40-item, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from Li (2004).

Before the participants filled the questionnaires, the researcher explained the objective of the study to the participants and they were informed that the survey was anonymous. Then, the participants were provided with Rotter's Locus of Control scale including 29 items. After one-week interval, the vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire was administered. While the participants were completing the questionnaires, the researchers were present to clarify any misunderstanding concerning the items of the questionnaires.

4. Result and Discussion

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations that each group on LOC and VLSs. As shown in this table, the male participants obtained a slightly higher score on LOC than the female participants. They also gained a slightly higher score on vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire than the female ones.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for LOC and VLSs

	Males		Females	
	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.
1. LOC	12.95	3.44	12.78	2.67
2. VLSs	101.30	12.69	99.90	14.55

Pearson Product Moment Correlation was run to determine the possible correlation between the participants' LOC and their VLSs use. As Table 2 indicates, the participants' LOC was unrelated to their VLSs use ($r = -.047$). In other words, there is not any significant relationship between LOC and EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies.

Table 2. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients for LOC and VLSs

		Vocabulary learning strategies
LOC	Pearson Correlation	-.047
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.690
	N	74

As Table 1 shows, a slight difference was observed between the male and female participants' mean scores of LOC and VLSs. To check whether the observed difference between the male and female participants in LOC and VLSs was statistically significant, a series of independent samples t-test was run to compare the male and female participants' mean scores of LOC and VLSs. As Tables 3 and 4 show, male and female participants did not have any significant difference in terms of their use of vocabulary learning strategies. Also, sex did not contribute to any significant difference in the male and female participants' LOC.

Table 3. Independent Sample t-test for VLSs in Males and Females

	Levene's T t-test for Equality of Means							95% Confidence	
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-	Mean Diff	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
Equal vari	.803	.373	.398	72	.691	1.402	3.519	-5.614	8.418
Equal vari			.420	48.33	.677	1.4023	3.341	-5.314	8.119

Table 4. Independent Sample t-test for LOC in Males and Females

Levene's Test fo: t-test for Equality of Means									
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-t	Mean E	Std. Err	95% Confidence	
								Lower	Upper
Equal v	1.073	.304	.234	72	.816	.1722	.7368	-1.296	1.641
Equal v			.213	34.506	.833	.1722	.8101	-1.473	1.817

Pooling together, the results of the study indicated that the participants' locus of control (LOC) and their use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) were found to have an insignificant correlation with each other. That is, the degree to which the participants have an internal or an external locus of control does not seem to have any significant relationship with their perceptions of how vocabulary should be learned. Also, it was found that there is no significant difference between male and female participants in terms of their locus of control and their use of vocabulary learning strategies. This probably means that the variable of gender does not make any significant difference in EFL learners' locus of control, i.e. the degree to which they consider events to be within or out of their control, nor does it create any significant difference in EFL learners' habits of vocabulary learning, i.e. the strategies they usually use to improve their vocabulary knowledge.

As Boonkongsan (2012) pointed out, the results concerning the relationship between the learners' use of VLSs and gender are still inconclusive and complex. In fact, the studies investigating the relationship between the learners' use of VLS and gender yielded mixed results. The results of the present study are in accord with those of other researchers (Arjomand&Sharififar, 2011; Chang Tsai & Chang, 2009; Fan, 2003; Khatib, Hassandeh,&Rezaei,2011) who found that female and male learners showed no significant difference of their vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) use and they normally used the same strategies and were more alike than different. However, the results are at variance with the literature that revealed male and female learners employed various vocabulary learning strategies for learning vocabulary (Catalan, 2003; Gu, 2002; Jones, 2006; Seddigh, 2012; Siriwan, 2007;Yongqi, 2002).

Nyikos (1987) found that males outperformed females in regard to visual and color association strategy for vocabulary learning. Similarly, Jiménez (2003) and Yongqi (2002) found that males and females' performance was significantly different regarding VLSs use, with female learners being reportedly more frequent users of VLSs.

With regard to the difference between male and female EFL learners' LOC, no difference was found between male and female learners in LOC. In this case, the result is in agreement with those of Yates (2009) and Bohanek et al. (2006) who found that there was no effect of gender on locus of control. However, the result of the present study is not in accord with those of Sarıçam, Duran, and Çardak (2012). They found a significant difference between scores of internal and external locus of control of females and scores of internal and external locus of control of males. In the same vein, the results of other studies (Bostic, 2010; Cooley & Nowicki, 1988; Marecek & Frasch, 1977) reported that gender made a difference in the perceived locus of control.

5. Conclusion

Vocabulary learning is an essential component of learning any language; consequently, vocabulary knowledge has become a main concern for both teachers and learners. Accordingly, different vocabulary learning strategies are introduced to make the learning of new vocabulary easier. In this research, the researcher tried to explore if there is any meaningful relationship between EFL learners' different psychological orientations e.g. their internal or external views of locus of control and their use of vocabulary learning strategies. The correlation between EFL learners' locus of control (LOC) and their use of vocabulary learning strategies turned out to be insignificant. That is, the degree to which an EFL learner has an internal or an external locus of control does not seem to have any significant relationship with their perceptions of how vocabulary should be learned. It was also found that the male and female participants were not significantly different in their locus of control and their use of vocabulary learning strategies.

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