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**Shahrood University of Technology**

**English Language Department**

**Language Learning Strategies from the Bottom-Up: Successful EFL Learners'  
Experience of Preparing for the University Admission English Test**

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با نام و یاد خداوند متعال، ارزیابی جلسه دفاع از پایان نامه کارشناسی ارشد آقای مهران منتظری با شماره دانشجویی ۹۵۱۴۳۴۴ رشته زبان انگلیسی گرایش آموزش تحت عنوان بررسی راهبردها و تجربیات یادگیری زبان دانش آموزان موفق در کنکور که در تاریخ ۱۳۹۸/۰۶/۱۶ با حضور هیأت محترم داوران در دانشگاه صنعتی شاهرود برگزار گردید به شرح ذیل اعلام می گردد:

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Dear God, Once again you showed me how great you are. I thank you with all of my heart. This thesis is dedicated to my honorable, loving and extra-ordinary mother and father who didn't hesitate to give me their support whenever I needed it.

## تعهد نامه

اینجانب **مهران منتظری** دانشجوی دوره کارشناسی ارشد رشته آموزش زبان انگلیسی دانشکده مهندسی صنایع و مدیریت دانشگاه صنعتی شاهرود نویسنده پایان نامه بررسی راهبردها و تجربیات یادگیری زبان دانش آموزان موفق در کنکور تحت راهنمایی دکتر سید علی استوار نامقی متعهد می شوم.

- تحقیقات در این پایان نامه توسط اینجانب انجام شده است و از صحت و اصالت برخوردار است .
- در استفاده از نتایج پژوهشهای محققان دیگر به مرجع مورد استفاده استناد شده است .
- مطالب مندرج در پایان نامه تاکنون توسط خود یا فرد دیگری برای دریافت هیچ نوع مدرک یا امتیازی در هیچ جا ارائه نشده است .
- کلیه حقوق معنوی این اثر متعلق به دانشگاه صنعتی شاهرود می باشد و مقالات مستخرج با نام « دانشگاه صنعتی شاهرود » و یا « Shahrood University of Technology » به چاپ خواهد رسید .
- حقوق معنوی تمام افرادی که در به دست آمدن نتایج اصلی پایان نامه تأثیرگذار بوده اند در مقالات مستخرج از پایان نامه رعایت می گردد.
- در کلیه مراحل انجام این پایان نامه ، در مواردی که از موجود زنده ( یا بافتهای آنها ) استفاده شده است ضوابط و اصول اخلاقی رعایت شده است .
- در کلیه مراحل انجام این پایان نامه، در مواردی که به حوزه اطلاعات شخصی افراد دسترسی یافته یا استفاده شده است اصل رازداری ، ضوابط و اصول اخلاق انسانی رعایت شده است .

## تاریخ

### امضای دانشجو

#### مالکیت نتایج و حق نشر

کلیه حقوق معنوی این اثر و محصولات آن (مقالات مستخرج ، کتاب ، برنامه های رایانه ای ، نرم افزار ها و تجهیزات ساخته شده است ) متعلق به دانشگاه صنعتی شاهرود می باشد . این مطلب باید به نحو مقتضی در تولیدات علمی مربوطه ذکر شود .

استفاده از اطلاعات و نتایج موجود در پایان نامه بدون ذکر مرجع مجاز نمی باشد.

## **Abstract**

Success in the English section of the university admission test depends on candidates' breadth and depth of written skills, especially vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension and developing these areas mainly depends on the learners' awareness and appropriate use of appropriate learning strategies. Since many of these strategies are idiosyncratic in nature, this study aims at exploring the strategies university candidates use in preparing themselves for the English section of the university admission test. To this end, twenty candidates who showed a mastery level of 85% or higher were purposively sampled to participate in this study. The strategies they used were then uncovered through open-ended qualitative interviews. Candidates' perspectives were then transcribed verbatim and then thematically analyzed to uncover the strategies they actually used in preparing for this high stake test. Thematic analysis of the participants' perspectives revealed several down-to-earth techniques and strategies. The findings have clear implications for all stakeholders, especially candidates who are preparing themselves for this high-stake test since their awareness of these strategies will greatly contribute to their performance in the test and their future course of study.

*Keywords: Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Case Study, University Admission Test (UAT)*

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**Chapter 1**  
**Introduction**

## 1.1. Overview

Almost every student in Iran must take part in a university admission test called “Konkur” in order to enter the university. The test consists of various courses such as mathematics, physics, practical sciences, Persian literature, Arabic, English, etc. For specific majors such as mathematics, humanities, and practical sciences some items of the test vary. But the item that all majors have in common is English language which is the main scope of this study.

The English language part of the university admission test includes four categories: Grammar, Vocabulary, Cloze-test, and Reading comprehension. The grammar in this test is concise and very important. It tries to measure students’ knowledge of grammar through 3 to 4 questions. The vocabulary part consists of 6 to 8 questions. However vocabulary is one of the greatest worries and fears of most students due to the fact that meaning and perception of the words and sentences form the fabric of all 4 parts of the test specially the reading comprehension which consists of 8 to 10 questions about English texts. The cloze-test part includes 5 questions about a text with missing words or phrases which students must fill. During almost 7 years of learning English at school, students learn and use some strategies in order to succeed in the university admission test. These strategies can be conscious or unconscious.

Every person acquires language in a different manner (Ortega, 2009). According to Dornyei (2007) second language acquisition is substantially affected by the individual differences. Different learning styles and strategies result in these individual differences. Based on Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford (2003), some demographic factors such as age, gender, aptitude, attitude, motivation, and emotions affect the learning process. Beside these factors, we focus on language learning strategies of successful students. It is important to mention that conducting research on language learning strategies is highly difficult due to the fact that they are not observable directly (Griffiths, 2004).

According to Oxford (2017) in order to meet their goals, students use some purposeful and mental actions. These goals might be solving a learning obstacle, finishing a task, or improving proficiency. Oxford also mentions that these strategies occur in specific contexts and can be learned from various sources such as teachers, books, and other students. She also remarks that language learning strategies effectively self-learned by many students. Oxford (1989) also states that language learning strategies are actions that are used to make learning more successful, autonomous, and enjoyable.

Robin (1975) defines language learning strategies as the techniques or devices that are used in order to acquire knowledge. If language learners do not apply some learning strategies whether they go to English classes or not, their chance of being successful is slim. Stern (1975) remarked that learning process greatly affects learning

outcomes. Therefore the learning process is influenced by the learner's characteristics and learning conditions.

Littlewood (1996) states that language learning is gradually shifting from teacher-centered to student-centered since 1960s. That was when the students began to become more independent and autonomous and this is not feasible without applying language learning strategies. According to Oxford and Crookall (1989) learning strategies are steps which make process of acquisition, storage, and retrieval easier. In other words language learning strategies are useful for short term and long term memory training. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) believe that learning strategies are special ways to increase comprehension. According to Oxford (1990) when the learners apply their strategies, they will feel more responsible and encouraged, so more learning will occur. Language learning strategies will also help teachers to train less capable students to be a successful, competent and independent language learner. After the identification of language learning strategies of a successful learner, we can teach them to weak students and help them become successful. The obvious fact is that using strategies will facilitate learning a foreign language.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

In a country such as Iran in which the first and main language of the people is not English, it can be very hard, time consuming, and expensive to pursue learning English outside school considering the fact that most English language institutes go forward only with commercial purposes. Even though some students learn and acquire English language successfully, they cannot use it in the society due to the fact that Persian is the main language and English is not spoken.

Another question that is of importance is "why do students even need to go to English classes outside school, given the fact that they learn it there for almost 7 years." The answer to this question is outside the scope of the current study, but the nature of the UAT is much more different from English at school because it is a selection test among thousands of participants.

Due to the fact that schools mostly cannot meet the students' needs for test solving, so many families are obliged to send their children to test preparation classes in order to do well in the university admission test or to be able to speak English generally. Unfortunately they believe that if they don't send their children to these classes and don't pay the expensive costs of these classes, their children wouldn't be able to perform well in the admission test.

In Iran, students must take part in a university admission test known as "Konkur". This fact makes families send their children to extra-curriculum classes which happen to be very expensive and in most cases inefficient. In the case of English, it is observed that a remarkable amount of those who have gone to test preparation classes have performed poorly in the admission test. On the contrary, it was observed

that some students, who performed really well, had not taken part in any test preparation classes outside school at all. So the question that is raised now is how it is possible to do well in the admission test without going to extra classes?

### **1.3.Purpose of the Study**

This study aims at discovering the strategies and techniques used by successful English learners who showed a 95% or higher level of mastery in the English Section of the university admission test. More specifically it aims at answering the general research question, “What strategies do you use to prepare yourself for the English section of the UAT?”

### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

#### **1.4.1. Implications**

This study challenges and questions the methods and strategies used by many private test institutes that charge families a remarkable amount of money without providing good results. By discovering and applying appropriate learning strategies that successful EFL learners have used for preparing for the university admission test, we can improve the concept of learning both at schools and at home. We can also help students become more autonomous and save a remarkable amount of money and time which is spent on outside school classes.

#### **1.4.2. Applications**

This research is firstly useful for EFL learners and their families who don't have the time or resources to go to English classes outside schools. By applying the strategies of successful learners, students can have a much better result in the university admission test. Secondly, the findings of this study can help material developers who intend to use learning strategies in their books. Finally, school teachers would be able to teach these strategies at schools in order to help students be self-reliable and autonomous.

#### **1.4.3. Limitations**

Despite the fact that this study achieves its goals, there have been some limitations in the process. The first and the main problem was finding highly successful EFL learners who had a high score in the university admission test without having participated in any language classes outside school. The second problem was that most of these students were female and the researcher was male. Therefore due to religious and cultural factors, some of them refused to cooperate. The third problem was the unavailability and

unreachability of these students. Because they were so busy or so far away across the country, it was very hard to arrange an interview with them.

#### **1.4.4. Delimitations**

In order to delimit the limitations we traveled to 5 top universities in Iran such as Tehran University, Kharazmi University, Ferdowsi University, Mazandaran University, and Gilan University. There, we asked about the target participants for the current study and found some students of interest who had scored more than 85% in the English part of the university admission test. For the gender problem, we persuaded them to participate with a family member of their own interest.





**Chapter 2**  
**Review of the Related Literature**

## **2.1 Overview**

In this chapter, we elaborate on the concept of language learning strategies and various aspects of it in education. Here, we mention some factors related to language learning strategies and review some recent studies on the effects of language learning strategies in education and learner autonomy.

## **2.2. Definition of Language Learning Strategies**

Scholars have directly defined language learning strategies. Below is presented some main definitions:

Tarone (1983) has defined language strategies as “an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language to incorporate these into one’s interlanguage competence.” Rubin (1987) stated that language strategies “are strategies which contribute to the development of language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly.” Oxford (1992/1993) brings ample examples of language learning strategies and an elaborate definition: “...Language learning strategies – specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability”. (Oxford, 1992/1993, p18) Stern (1992) believes that “the concept of learning strategy is independent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques.” (Stern 1992, p261) .Weinstein and Mayer (1986) defined learning strategies as “behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning. The goal is to influence the learner’s encoding process”

Mayer (1988) also defines learning strategies as those intentional behaviors of a learner that influences on the way he processes information. According to Chamot, Barnhardt, El- Dinany, and Robins (1990) , all language learners use language learning strategies consciously or unconsciously. The goal of teaching these strategies is to help students control how they learn in order to promote efficiency, motivation, and independence in language learners. Despite the fact that many definitions have been provided, we can conclude that language learning strategies are ways of improving language learning process.

### **2.2.1. The Origin of Language Learning Strategies in Education**

The research about language learning strategies first began during the 1960s. The development of cognitive psychology had greatly influenced the research related to language learning strategies. Aaron (1966) conducted a research called the method of inference in foreign language study. This was the first research on language learning

strategies. Rubin (1971) conducted a research elaborating on the strategies of successful learners and stated that if we identify these language learning strategies, we can give them to less successful learners. Rubin (1975) has also categorized language learning strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning.

### **2.2.2. Characteristics of Language Learning Strategies**

Here is a number of basic characteristics that are generally accepted:

Language learning strategies are steps taken by language learners, so they are Learner-centered. They also promote language learning via developing language competence as reflected in the learner's skills in listening, speaking, reading or writing. It is believed that LLS can be visible such as behaviors, steps, techniques, etc... or hidden such as thoughts and mental processes. LLS also involves information and memory such as vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, etc. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies allow learners to become more self-directed. It also expands the role of language teachers. Oxford also states that LLS is flexible, problem-oriented, and can be taught to students. Cohen (1990) on the other hand states that only conscious strategies are language learning strategies and a choice involved for the learner is necessary and of importance. This is contradictory to the aspect of unconscious strategies that promote learning such as hidden aspects like thinking and mental processes which sometimes are not conscious. But according to him, if any attempt to use strategies is conscious, it is a learning strategy.

### **2.2.3. Types of Language Learning Strategies**

Many scholars have categorized and classified different language learning strategies. It is observed that most of these categories are more or less similar to the same concept without a significant change. Below is presented some classifications of LLS.:

Rubin (1987) states that there are two types of language learning strategies, the first group contributes directly to learning and the second group indirectly affects it. According to Rubin, 3 types of strategies that affect learning directly or indirectly are learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. Rubin (1987) classified language learning strategies into cognitive learning strategies, meta cognitive learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. Meta cognitive strategies are used to operate or self-direct language learning. They include some steps like planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management. Communication strategies are less associated to language learning because their main concern is the process of taking part in a conversation and transferring meaning as well as making sense of the speaker's intention. Communication strategies are used when the interlocutors encounter some difficult situations or misunderstandings. Social strategies

are those which are used by learners when they want to get chances to practice or expose their knowledge. According to Rubin and Wenden (1987), these strategies “bring exposure to the target language but, indirectly help learning since they don’t directly cause obtaining, restoring, retrieving, and using the language”. (Rubin and Wenden 1987, p.23-27)

Oxford (1990) divides language learning strategies into two classes, direct and indirect which are subdivided into 6 groups. According to Oxford, LLS. aims at promoting communicative competence. Oxford also states that Meta cognitive strategies regulate students learning, affective strategies are based on the learner’s emotional requirements, while social strategies increase the interaction within the target language. The strategies that learners use in order to make sense of their learning are called cognitive strategies. Oxford’s (1990) classed language learning strategies into direct strategies and indirect Strategies which includes meta cognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

Stern (1992) states that language learning strategies are divided into 5 categories:

1. Management and planning (decide what commitment to make to language learning and set himself reasonable goals)
2. Cognitive strategies (have continuous evaluation and take steps or operations in learning and problem solving.
3. Communicative or Experiential strategies
4. Interpersonal strategies
5. Affective strategies

According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are divided into six categories, Memorization, Cognitive, Compensation, Meta cognitive, Affective and social strategies. Here we elaborate on each concept:

1. Memorization Strategies: Every language learner uses some techniques in order to remember, retrieve or recall information for future language use. This strategy helps students save essential information which was obtained from learning.
2. Cognitive Strategies: These strategies help learners to utilize their target language by using their mental abilities such as reasoning, analyzing, and drawing conclusions.
3. Compensation Strategies: These are applied by the learners in order to make them able to guess the missing information in the target language due to not having enough words or phrases. These strategies help learners to speak in

the target language and transfer their meaning even with their limited knowledge and vocabulary. Linguistic clues help them to guess meaning.

4. Meta Cognitive Strategies: Centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating, help learners to coordinate their learning. This enables students to have control over their learning. Here students are able to predict the appropriate strategies that are going to be used in the future and change them if not suitable.
5. Affective Strategies: Every learner must control their emotions, attitudes, values, and motivation through applying these strategies. These strategies can change students' feelings toward learning so this has a great importance in learning. For instance, students can reward themselves for their achievements or make jokes to relieve anxiety and stress.
6. Social strategies: Any attempt used by the learners in order to be exposed to language in the society and practice their knowledge follows these strategies. This is very important because in most cases learning involves other people. For example, learners ask native or non-native speakers some important questions and elaborately analyze that information in order to upgrade their language knowledge.

### **2.2.3.1 Cognitive Language Learning Strategies**

Cognitive learning strategies are operations that are used in learning or solving problems that need to be analyzed, transformed, or synthesized directly out of the learning materials. The term “cognitive strategies” refers to the use of mind or cognition in order to solve problems or complete a specific task (Arellano, 1999). According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) cognitive strategies can also be considered as procedural facilitators. Rosenshine (1997) considers them as procedural prompts, and Palincsar and Brown (1984) refer them as scaffolds.

Cognitive strategies are helpful when a task cannot be completed through a series of steps by providing a structure for learning. For instance, different formulas in mathematics provide a series of steps to solve problems. However, for a complex task like reading comprehension, following a series of steps alone may not provide success. According to Rosenshine (1997) a cognitive strategy helps to support the learners while developing internal procedures that lead to performing complex tasks. Reading comprehension is such a complex task that requires cognitive strategies. According to Rosenshine (1997) self-questioning by learners while reading texts helps them understand what they read. He also states that the act of asking questions alone does not necessarily lead to comprehension but helps the learners search the text and combine information as they make new questions so they can understand what they have read.

Cognitive strategies can increase the efficiency when learners approach a learning task. These tasks can include paraphrasing and classifying information,

memorizing and getting information from the content, making sentences and constructing paragraphs. Cognitive strategies are also referred to as “Content Enhancement”. According to Bulgren, Deshler, and Schumaker (1997) teachers play an important role in evaluating the content, determining the needed approaches for students’ success, and supporting students for applying new techniques and strategies in their learning process.

### **2.2.3.2. Metacognitive Language Learning Strategies**

Metacognition is a term that refers to the knowledge and control over the cognitive processes. Metacognitive strategies define knowing when, where, and how to use different strategies. According to Baker (2002, 2008) and Pressley (2002) Metacognitive strategies include having awareness and control over planning, revising, repairing, summarizing, concluding, monitoring, and evaluating. By using metacognitive strategies, we learn how to carry out other strategies more efficiently. Metacognition is also referred to as “thinking about thinking”. It is a regulatory system that helps the learner to understand his or her own cognitive performance. According to Hacker (2009) Metacognition enables people to take charge of their own learning. It includes awareness of how they learn, evaluation of their learning needs, employing strategies to meet these needs and applying these strategies. It has been reported that learners’ self-confidence, motivation, learning success, and self-efficacy significantly increases after building metacognitive skills. (Abu, 2003)

According to Burt, Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1997) Metacognitive learning strategies facilitate learning how to learn. Here are some examples of metacognitive strategies: First, Ask questions due to the fact that it allows learners to reflect on their own learning process and strategies. Then, Foster Self-reflection in order to emphasize the importance of personal reflection during and after learning experiences and critically analyze assumptions and the effects of them on the learning process. Encouraging self-questioning is another metacognitive strategy that fosters independent learning. This helps learners make new questions and answer them in order to enhance their comprehension. According to Salataki and Akyel (2002); and Phakiti (2003) Metacognitive strategies help students to regulate and monitor their cognitive strategies. They are the concepts of thinking about thinking and are planned, goal-directed, future-oriented, intentional mental processes that are employed in order to accomplish cognitive tasks. The difference between metacognitive and cognitive strategies is that metacognitive strategies span multiple subject areas while cognitive strategies are within one subjected area. As a result, learners who are meta-cognitively aware are able to administer the right approach when facing difficulties in learning. Ramesh (2009) states that recognizing and monitoring cognitive and metacognitive processes is one of the most important that teachers should help students with. Wang (2009) conducted a study and found that metacognitive learning strategies are extremely beneficial for students’ comprehension and fostering their learning activities.

### 2.3. Theoretical Perspectives

Some scholars believe that strategy training should be an inseparable part of instructed section language acquisition. According to Anderson (2008), Chamot (2004), Ellis and Sinclair (1989), Grenfell and Harris (1999), Murphy (2008), Rubin (2005), and Rubin (2013) strategy training and putting it in the language learning programs in order to empower learners to plan, motivate, evaluate and improve their performance is very crucial and important as well as transferring these language learning strategies to the new learning settings. (Cohen 2014, p.46) Grenfell (2004), Cohen (2008), Marco (2001), and Oxford (2011) stated that teaching only a specific set of language learning strategies to less successful learners might demotivate them because it would limit their own creativity and self variation and also “the human capacity to act on informed choices” (Benson & Cooker, 2013, p.7) O’Malley and Chamot (1990) state that metacognitive strategies are very important and “students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions” (1990: 8) . They also state that cognitive strategies are the best ones as well as repeating words and phrases loud. According to them the most frequent strategy is repetition. (1990: 80). O’Malley and Chamot (1993) state that “individuals who take a more strategic approach learn more rapidly and effectively than individuals who do not” (O’Malley & Chamot 1993, p.105).

Oxford (1990) has classified language learning strategies into six categories and states that language learners can use plenty of language learning strategies. She states that affective strategies are used in order to overcome the emotions or attitudes, Meta cognitive strategies are used for the organization, concentration, and evaluation of one’s self learning. Social strategies are also used for cooperation with others in the learning process. She states that cognitive strategies are used for making relationship with the new information and the previous data (schemata) in order to analyze it. Learners use memory strategies in order to save new data into the memory for the purpose of retrieving it for the future use. Learners also overcome deficiencies or gaps in their language knowledge by using compensation strategies.

Andrew (1998) states that, we can only categorize conscious behaviors made by language learners, as learning strategies. He also states that there are various learning strategies such as planning and organizing the learning which is Meta cognitive, using mnemonic devices to learn vocabulary which is cognitive, and repeating out loud words and phrases which is performance strategy and self-talk for the purpose of increasing self confidence which is affective strategy. According to Cohen (2012), Griffiths (2013), and Oxford (2011) although concentrating on meta cognitive strategies sounded really appealing to language teachers and material developers, but there are some internal and external factors that have an important influence on the strategy. These

factors can be gender, age, motivation, and cultural background. Sewell (2003) states that the trend towards language learning strategies has originated from a desire to identify and comprehend the characteristics of a good language learner. He also states that the learner has an active role in the process of learning and the application of appropriate language learning strategies plays a very crucial role in that process. According to his research, being a good and successful language learner is a result of using proper language learning strategies which has led to fluent acquisition, thus studying these strategies used by successful learners plays a very important role into achieving successful acquisition. Rubin (1975) suggests that successful language learners are willing to learn and they are good guessers and have a strong willingness to communicate. They are also not limited and not afraid to make mistakes. They would look on forms and patterns in order to analyze the rest of the text. They would take advantage of every single learning opportunity and practice and monitor their speech as well as paying attention to meaning.

Rubin and Wenden (1987) state that most research on language learning strategies has been concentrated on identifying what kind of strategies successful language learners use in order to acquire a foreign language. Oxford (1994) has the same opinion with Rubin and Wenden (1987) and states that research on successful language learners' behaviors has become a primary concern in the field of language learning strategies. Oxford states that a reasonable amount of language strategies of good learners have been identified. But there is a remarkable part still inhibited. She has also found that many language learners overcome their anxiety by self-talk, practicing in personal and private places, and participating in communicative situations.

Skehan (1989) states that successful language learners have control over their language learning strategies. On the contrary, students who can't learn a foreign language well haven't applied any language learning strategies. Dreyer and Oxford (1996) state that male and female students tend to use different strategic patterns. They define strategic patterns as actions and plans that are employed in order to improve their performance. They state that female students tend to use more metacognitive strategies such as planning, organizing, and evaluating their progress than males. They state that on the other hand of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, social strategies are used equally by both males and females. This means that there is no significant difference between social strategy use among male and female learners (Kaylani, 1996). According to Chaves (2001) female language learners are more successful than male students and this originates from the fact that male and female students apply different language learning strategies. Dörnyei (1994) stated that language learning strategies are not merely the end for language teaching, but are means to enhance and increase students' motivation and confidence. He clarified the importance of positive reinforcement and praise as well as a supportive environment in the field of strategy training. He also stated that any language learning strategy has the feature of being taught or trained (Cohen, 1998; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003).



According to Gremmo and Riley (1995) learner training should pave the way for learners to have access to methodological resources like techniques and activities as well as a rationale for selecting these materials. Later on, Cheng (2000) states that “any teacher, Western or Eastern, who plans to use methodologies which inevitably involves students’ participation must make sure that the students are familiar with and accept such methodologies” (Cheng, 2000; p.444). Wenden (1991) states that the importance of teaching effective strategy use in order to promote learner autonomy has become crystal clear for teachers and researchers. Reder and Strawn (2001) suggest that teachers are prompted to select appropriate learning strategies and teach them to their students. According to Murray (2004) teachers must select and apply most suitable methods, activities, and procedures to increase and develop learner autonomy by “modeling for students’ strategies which they can use in self-directed learning” (Murray, 2004; p.6).

#### **2.4. Empirical Findings**

According to research conducted on learning strategies, some remarkable findings are presented below:

It was during the 1960s that the research on the usage of language learning strategies first began to get more attention when Rubin (1975) and Naiman (1975) attempted to find and identify the strategies used by successful language learners. Rubin (1975) found that there are specific strategies applied by students in order to improve and develop their learning. After that, Naiman and Frohlich (1975) provided a list of strategies used by successful EFL learners. Naiman (1976) also reached an agreement with the previous research on language learning strategies use in the learning procedures. Based on their research, they categorized learners as “good” or “poor” which meant good language learners tended to use more language learning strategies while poor language learners used very few or none.

According to the results of research conducted by Green and Oxford (1995) , Porte (1988) , Purpura (1998), Van and Abraham (1990), Wen and Johnson (1997) the main weakness of less successful learners was not being able to apply and use language learning strategies rather than the quantity and variety of the context. (Chamot 2005, p.120; Gu 1996, p.647). Porte (1988) conducted a study on 15 less successful Italian students by interviewing them. These students’ scores were remarkably low in the placement test. He found out that some of these students tended to use language learning strategies such as using dictionaries and inferring from the text just like successful students but the main problem and deficiency was applying inappropriate language learning strategies for a specific context.

Gillette (1994) conducted a study on successful and less successful French learners who went to an American university. Based on the results of his study, he found that students’ personal backgrounds had a very substantial role in their goal setting, planning, motivation, and finally their choice of applying the suitable language learning strategies. For instance one of the less successful participants regarded foreign

language as “useless baggage” because he had never set foot outside his home town and it was useless for him to learn it but in order to pass the requirement of the course, he deployed less effective strategies such as translation and rote learning. This caused Gillette to argue about the insertion of language learning strategies into learning programs where students only use strategies that are in favor of their own interests and social contexts. (Gillette, 1994; p.212) In a study conducted by Rubin (1975) she found that successful language learners tend to use some learning strategies such as: making reasonable guesses when not certain, making an effort to communicate and learn from it, finding strategies for solving the limitations and problems in the target language interaction, practicing the language whenever possible, monitoring their own and others speech, paying attention to form and grammar as well as paying attention to meaning. According to the results of her study, these strategies are applied in order to facilitate, improve and enhance the learning process.

Naiman, Frohlich, and Todesco (1975) also conducted a study on the strategies used by successful learners and found that the learners tend to think in the target language and address the affective aspects of acquiring language. They found that autonomous learners tend to find these strategies in order to increase the efficiency of their learning. These strategies would vary based on the goal, motivation, background and culture of the language learners. They also found that language learning strategies are conscious behaviors or actions used by language learners in order to improve their conception of the target language. Claus Gnutzman (2005) conducted a study on language learning strategies and found that “Most researchers have rejected the notion of a single profile of the “good language learner” because over the years research studies have shown that there can be remarkable difference among equally successful language learners. Rather than limiting the description of the good language learner to one that is prescriptive and ignores learner differences, the more recent and inclusive view is that there are various ways that language learners can be successful. For the most part, these learners are strategic in their learning”

Ghani (2003) conducted a study on the field of language learning strategies and identified these strategies as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that learners use to improve their progress in developing second language skills. She also states that these strategies are a means of facilitating the internalization, storage, retrieval, or the new language use in general. She also more elaborately studied the strategies used by learners in the process of learning a foreign language. She states that learners tend to vary remarkably in both the overall frequency with which they employ strategies as well as the specific type of strategies they use. Different students tend to apply different strategies in their learning process. Learning style is an important factor affecting the language learning strategies use. Andrew (2006) has also conducted a study and reaches similar results to Ghani (2003) which found that learners are being motivated to learn and apply language learning strategies in their learning process. This is based on the belief that leaning is facilitated by learning would be facilitated if

students are given a variety of language learning strategies which they can freely choose in order to learn a foreign language.

Miller (2000) conducted a study on 125 German students in order to find out whether language learning strategies had been effective in their foreign language learning by interviews. She found that language learning strategies usage was alongside greater experience and this fact was facilitated by individual difference factors. Kemp (2007) conducted a study on 144 learners through a questionnaire with 40 items in which the participants could freely add their own extra answers in each question. The purpose of this study was to explore the application of grammar learning strategies. These students knew a range of two to twelve languages. She found that as the number of languages learnt by student increased, they tended to use more language learning strategies. Psaltou-Joycey and Kantaridou (2009) also conducted a study using the strategy inventory for language learning (Oxford, 1990) on 1555 Greek university students who were learning foreign languages and found that trilingual students used more strategies than bilingual students and they often used metacognitive and cognitive strategies. Sung (2011) also conducted a study on the relation of the number of languages known by learners and the number of strategies used by them and found a positive correlation. He found that those who knew more than one language tended to use more metacognitive, affective, cognitive and social strategies in comparison with the ones who were learning only one. Megens and Graus (2016) used think-aloud protocols in order to get the results that when students were exposed to a totally unknown language, those who knew more than one language, tended to use more language learning strategies.

Merkelbach (2011) employed strategy inventory for language learning in order to investigate the application of language leaning strategies among Korean university students who were learning English as a second language and German as the third language. According to the results of the study, the students who were learning a third language used more metacognitive, storage, affective, and social strategies but the ones who were learning a second language used cognitive and compensation strategies more frequently. Haukås (2015) conducted a study on 132 English learners and 104 German learners and found that more strategies were used by those learning English as the second language than those learning German as the third one. By further investigation, she found that this was one of the results of lack of motivation which caused German language students to use fewer strategies. Mitits and Gavriilidou (2016) conducted a study on 307 Greek students and found a positive correlation on the language learning strategies by successful students. The results of their study showed that students tended to use more language learning strategies for Greek language rather than English but in both cases cognitive and affective strategies were applied by successful students. Abu (2003) conducted a study on Arab students studying English in Palestine national university and found that out of 99 successful male and female students, 76 percent of them used metacognitive strategies and 63 percent of them tended to use compensation strategies. Arellano (1999) conducted a study in Mexico using Oxford's instrument and

found that applying language learning strategies helped more students learn English. The participants of his study used flash cards to remember new words and improve their reading skills. They also applied some strategies in order to improve their repetition and practice.

Rao (2016) conducted a study and found that more professional English learners had applied more language learning strategies than unprofessional students. He states that the higher their level went, the more strategies they tended to use. Jabbari and Golkar (2014) conducted a study and found that students with a higher positive attitude used more language learning strategies. They found a positive correlation between positive attitude and language learning strategies employment. According to their study, students with a positive attitude toward learning tended to use cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, and social strategies. Wong and Nunan (2011) conducted a study with the purpose of finding out the differences between individual learning strategy preferences of successful and less successful students. They categorized students via their English grades into successful and less successful students. Out of 674 students, they chose 110 students which included 77 more successful students and 33 less successful undergraduate students in China. Based on the results of their study, more successful learners had enabled themselves to apply, use and control language learning strategies while less successful students weren't able to do so.

Tabataba'ian and Zabihi (2011) conducted a study in order to find different strategies used by students who were using reading strategies for English for specific purposes and those who were using strategies for General English texts. They identified some good learning strategies that were used by both groups. Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) conducted a study on different language learning strategies of 196 undergraduate students. They administered TOEFL to all of the subjects and based on their grades, they categorized them into three groups of high-proficiency, mid-proficiency, and low-proficiency language learners. They conducted a qualitative research and found some strategies used by these learners. Alfian (2016) conducted a study on 8 high school students in Indonesia in order to find different strategies used by these learners. He found that there is no difference in the kind of strategies used by female and male learners. He administered Oxford's strategy inventory for language learning questionnaire and interviewed students in order to find that metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies were highly used by the participants. He reported that more successful learners tended to use more strategies than less successful learners.

Arce (2001) conducted a study on 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in Spain. She organized them into two groups as being more successful if their score was more than 85 percent and as less successful if they scored less than 70 percent. According to the results of her study which was contradictory with the previous research, she found that there was no significant strategy use among her participants and after further research; she concluded that learner's age is a very important factor in his or her ability to apply language learning strategies. Bidjerano (2005) conducted a study and found that female

learners tended to use more rehearsal, organization, time management, metacognitive, and elaboration strategies than male students. He also stated that there was no significant difference between males and females in terms of self-learning, seeking help, and critical thinking. He clarified that female learners owe their success to their organization skills as well as metacognitive strategy use.

Nyikos (1990) conducted a study in order to find that male and female students may use significantly different learning strategies. She states that female students have stronger verbal skills and are more fluent than males in terms of articulation. Politzer (1983) conducted a study and found that Spanish and Asian language learners used different language learning strategies. He found that Hispanics used more social strategies while Asian learners tended to use more memorization strategies. Later on, Oxford (1996) conducted a study on the strategies used by learners in different cultural backgrounds and found that Hispanic students scored highly in metacognitive strategies while Asian learners employed more social, metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies. She also found that more successful learners used more strategies than less successful learners. In further research Oxford (1988) found that female learners used more social strategies than male students.

Huang and Naerssen (1987) conducted a study and found that high proficient students tended to use more functional strategies in order to improve and increase their communicative skills. O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Mazaneres, Russo and Kupper (1985) conducted a study and interviewed 70 high school students who were learning English at schools. The results of their study showed that beginner and intermediate students tended to use more cognitive strategies than metacognitive strategies. However, intermediate students still tended to use more metacognitive strategies than beginner level students. This can lead to the fact that strategy use may be affiliated with the learner's proficiency level. It was observed that both levels tended to use note-taking, asking for clarification, repetition, and cooperation strategies. On the other hand, more advanced and older learners tended to apply more complex strategies and were able to identify different strategies easily (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989).

Abraham and Van (1987) conducted a study and found that successful learners applied more strategies than less successful learners and tended to guess the meaning, paraphrase and use clarification strategies. Phillips (1991) also conducted a study on 141 Asian adult English learning students in the United States and found that more proficient learners applied more paraphrasing, goal setting, and avoided any word by word translations. Griffiths (2003) also stated that highly advanced learners used learning strategies a lot more than lower level students. Pape and Wang (2003) also conducted a study and found that highly successful learners used totally different strategies than less successful students. They stated that less successful learners tended to use same strategies available to them. Chamot and El-Dinary (1999) conducted a study and concluded that more successful learners employ learning strategies more frequently and more flexibly alongside adding higher variety to them. They can easily

control, monitor, and adopt their strategies. On the contrary, less successful learners overuse one or two ineffective strategies and don't succeed at all because those strategies are limited and not suitable for their learning situations.

Yongwei (2017) conducted a case study on three of the most successful students and found that there was a positive relation between the amount of strategies used and their success rate. He found that the participants tended to use more repetition and social strategies which was using the words outside the context in which they had learned them. Komura and Hamamatsu (1991) conducted a study in Japan on 397 university students and 181 high school students. They administered a short story to the participants and gave them half an hour to read it. After that they were given a multiple choice test and the results showed that both group of participants did well. After analyzing the reasons behind this matter, they found that the participants' well performance was due to using guessing strategies.

## **2.5. Statement of the Gap**

No research has been done in order to identify the strategies used by successful English learners who haven't participated in any test preparation classes outside school but have scored highly in the university admission test.

## **2.6. Summary**

As research in the field of language learning strategies first began during the 1960s, many researchers (Rubin & Naiman, 1975; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Porte, 1988; Purpura, 1998; Van & Abraham, 1990; Wen & Johnson, 1997) found that successful language learners had used a remarkable amount of learning strategies while less successful learners had failed to do so. They state that LLS. is a means of facilitating the process of learning. According to Rubin (2005), Anderson (2008), Chamot (2004), Ellis and Sinclair (1989), Murphy (2008), Grenfell and Harris (1999), and Rubin (2013) strategy training and putting it in the language learning programs in order to empower learners to plan, motivate, evaluate and improve their performance is very crucial and important as well as transferring these language learning strategies to the new learning settings. (Cohen 2008, p.46) According to Cohen (2012), Griffiths (2013), and Oxford (2011) although concentrating on meta cognitive strategies sounded really appealing to language teachers and material developers, but there are some internal and external factors that have an important influence on the strategy. These factors can be gender, age, motivation, and cultural background.

Ghani (2003) conducted a study on the field of language learning strategies and identified these strategies as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that learners use to improve their progress in developing second language skills. Different

students tend to apply different strategies in their learning process. Learning style is an important factor affecting the language learning strategies use. These strategies are a means of facilitating the internalization, storage, retrieval, or the new language use in general. Wong and Nunan (2011) conducted a study with the purpose of finding out the differences between individual learning strategy preferences of successful and less successful students. They categorized students via their English grades into successful and less successful students. Out of 674 students, they chose 110 students which included 77 more successful students and 33 less successful undergraduate students in China. Based on the results of their study, more successful learners had enabled themselves to apply, use and control language learning strategies while less successful students weren't able to do so.

Wenden (1991) states that the importance of teaching effective strategy use in order to promote learner autonomy has become crystal clear for teachers and researchers. Reder and Strawn (2001) suggest that teachers are prompted to select appropriate learning strategies and teach them to their students. Dreyer and Oxford (1996) state that male and female students tend to use different strategic patterns. They define strategic patterns as actions and plans that are employed in order to improve their performance. They state that female students tend to use more metacognitive strategies such as planning, organizing, and evaluating their progress than males. (Kaylani, 1996) Komura and Hamamatsu (1991) administered a short story to the participants and gave them half an hour to read it. The results showed that both group of participants did well. They found that the participants' well performance was due to using guessing strategies. Yongwei (2017) conducted study and found that there was a positive relation between the amount of strategies used and the students' success rate. He found that the learners tended to use more repetition and social strategies which was using the words outside the context.

From all the theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, we conclude that there is a positive correlation between effective strategy use and the success rate. We also observed that most successful students were motivated to use these strategies in order to get much better results.





# **Chapter 3**

## **Methodology**

### 3.1. Overview

This study is based on case study which is a method that involves an up-close, in-depth, and detailed examination of as subject as well as its related contextual conditions. In this chapter we will introduce the concept of case study and several views upon it and also discuss the research context as well as the participants and sampling procedure. After that we will elaborate on data collection and data analysis procedures.

The reason for choosing a qualitative approach for this study is due to the fact that it attempts to elaborately explore the participants' personal experience, perception and behavior in the Iranian EFL context (Clissett, 2008). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) state that the qualitative research is "typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view" (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005, p.94).

### 3.2. Case Study Research Method

Yin (1984) describes case study research method as a practical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in the real context when there is no clear line between the phenomenon and the real context which several sources of evidence is used. (p.13). This definition clarifies that one of the strong points of case study is being able to initiate an investigation in the context of the phenomenon. Another understanding is that there is no need to recreate the phenomenon in synthetic environments such as a lab in order to better understand it while you can explore it in the real context. Rowley (2002) states that we should not confuse case study research with strictly qualitative studies; Case study can be a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. She states that case study research can involve multiple resources and multiple cases.

Hardt (1989) defines case studies as:

*Particularly well suited to new research areas or research areas for which existing theory seems inadequate. This type of work is highly complementary to incremental theory building from normal science research. The former is useful in early stages of research on a topic or when a fresh perspective is needed, whilst the latter is useful in later stages of knowledge. (Hardt, 1989; p. 548-549)*

Sturman (1997) states that a case study "is a general term for the exploration of an individual, group or phenomenon" (Sturman, 1997; p. 61). According to Mesec (1998) a case study is an elaborate description of an individual case or multiple cases considering their general and specific characteristics. Mesec (1998) defines case study as "a description and analysis of an individual matter or case [...] with the purpose to

identify variables, structures, forms and orders of interaction between participants in the situation, or in order to assess the performance of work or progress in development” (Mesec, 1998; p. 383). Sagadin (1991) has brought the following definition for case studies:

*case study is used when we analyze and describe, for example each person individually (his or her activities, needs, life situation, history, and etc.), a group of people, individual institutions, or problems, process, phenomenon or event in a particular institution, and etc. (Sagadin, 1991; p.31)*

Rogers (2013) considers case study as a scientific investigation in a specific real-life situation or situations with the purpose of solving a problem, or by lowering the ambiguity and the number of factors affiliated to the problem. He states that the problem or problems can either be people or events and situations. From this definition, it can be concluded that a case study as a systematic procedure that is non-subjective or bias to personal purposes. It can also be generalized to other situations. According to deWeerd-Nederhof (2001) case studies have their own operational procedures and best practices in order to be employed in a suitable manner. He also refers to case study as an investigation. It means that some professional skills such as perseverance, analytical thinking, and creativity is required for researchers in order to conduct successful case studies. According to Forni (1998) case studies are applied in order to solve problems not just avoid them. The result of case study research quantifies or systemizes unclear facts in order to facilitate decision-making. He also states that the first case study originated in 1829, conducted by Frederic Le Play who were considered as the father of social economics who aimed at managing his family’s finances.

Rogers (2013) states that, instead of applying a vast population survey, case study is focused on a comprehensive qualitative analysis of a phenomenon in a small group of participants. Thus case study research can be considered as a descriptive method. He also states that some people believe that the results of case study is limited to a small group, however, this is completely contradictory with the practical and applied nature of case studies which is applied in the real-life context not just some lab results. Baxter and Jack (2008) analyzed the research conducted by Yin and concluded that case study research is useful when we want to answer the questions of “how” and “why” when the behaviors of the participants is not under our control (Yin, 1994; p. 9). Eysenck (1976) states that “Sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases – not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something” (Eysenec, 1976; Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.224).

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011) qualitative research is crucial to the social construction of meaning and is affiliated with what people do and say without the need to use heavy measurement or numerical and statistical analysis. Qualitative

research is empirical in nature and interprets the situation in a particular context. It also examines the cases and generates principles and rules that rely on the analysis of the social experience which reflects the daily life experience of the participants.

Pacho (2015) states that case study enables the researcher to elaborately explore the experience of the participants in a specific context. According to Stringer (2007) the number and type of participants in case study research must be explicitly identified. The participants of the study were chosen via purposive sampling which according to Leedy and Ormrod (2005) “people or their units are chosen, as the name implies, for a particular purpose” (p.206). They also define sampling as the process of choosing a portion of the population which would represent the whole population. According to Bryman (2008) a sample refers to a part of population that is selected for the study which is a subset of the whole population. Coyne (1997) states that “there is no perfect ‘way’ of sampling, as it is a process that continues to evolve with the methodology” he also states that “the researcher should find out what information is most needed and most useful in a given situation, and then employ the most suitable methods” (Coyne, 1997, p.630). According to Cohen (2007) qualitative samples are often purposeful samples that are chosen for a specific purpose. According to Bernard (2006) and Flick (2009) the sampling procedure in qualitative research can involve deliberate choice of the participants because of the qualities they possess. Thus, the researcher decides what is needed to be known and starts to find people who are willing to provide the information by their knowledge or experience so that sampling proceeds according to the relevance of cases instead of their representativeness. (Pacho, 2015, p.46)

The nature of case study research is idiographic and often interpretive. Hamilton (1980) states that:

*Studies such as these build upon the analysis of single settings or occurrences. They treat each case as empirically distinct and, in contrast to survey analysis, do not automatically presume that different instances can be thrown together to form a homogenous aggregate.*  
(Hamilton, 1980, p.79)

Gerring (2004) states that people often misunderstand case studies as a research type or a research method of qualitative research. Some researchers (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006, 2011; Sagadin, 2004; Verschuren, 2003; Sturman 1997; Sturman, 1997; Simons, 2009) consider case studies as a qualitative research type. On the other hand, other researchers (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2004) consider case study as a qualitative research method. According to Seperich (1996) case studies require data collection from various sources. They also need a high generalization rate in order to enable future application in other situations. It is important to mention that the format of case study differs from other research methods that require an analysis

report that provides illustration of problems and recommendations. The conclusion is that a report is required when the aim is to facilitate real-life application not only for academic purposes. The theoretical framework of the case study must be considered before conducting the study. If we aim at determining individual perceptions, behaviors, or psychological factors, then this individual framework determines the type of data collection methods and types of questions and qualitative analysis. Rowley (2002) states that, data collection substantially depends on the competence of the researcher. Unlike a questionnaire, the information that is obtained is defined as it is being obtained while the researcher has an active role in the process. He must be able to ask good questions, observe and carefully collect the required information. She also states that the researcher should be able to approach the study in an unbiased, flexible, and professional manner. She states that data collection in a case study research should follow a case study protocol which includes the following parts:

1. Overview of the project
2. Field procedures and various information sources, and arrangements for accessing these sources.
3. Case study questions or the questions that the researcher must have in mind while collecting data. These questions help the researcher develop interview questions.

Rowley (2002) also states that multiple sources of evidence are available for collecting data in a case study project such as interviews, direct observation, archival records, documents, physical artifacts, and participant observation. Each source has its positive and negative points but each one of them can greatly influence the process of data collection. She also states that three key principles of data collection need to be considered which are:

1. **Triangulation:** this is one of the most important strength points of case study in comparison with other methods which helps data to be collected from multiple sources of information and then uses these data to corroborate the same fact or result.
2. **Case Study Database:** is necessary because it helps the documents be organized and easy to access. These documents include field notes, audio transcripts, interview papers, and etc. It also helps to access these files easily in order to prioritize the information to be presented in the study.
3. **Chain of Evidence:** it is necessary for the researcher to keep a chain of evidence. It should show that the case study questions follow the protocol and also should mention that the actual evidence in the database follow the priority list.

According to Yin (2003) one of the most important steps in data collection is documentation which includes making, gathering, or recording the related documents. After that the researcher needs to collect archival records which consists of performance score and success rate of the participants. He also states that making interviews is a crucial way to carefully investigate the subjects and direct observation is another way of obtaining information regarding the subjects. Boyce and Neale (2006) state that in-depth interviews are considered as a qualitative research technique that consists of intensive individual interviews with the participants in order to elaborately explore their perspectives or experiences on a specific situation or event. Guionet (2011) states that in-depth interviews are used for various aims such as assessing needs, refining programs, identifying issues, and strategic planning. Lisa (2011) states that the in-depth interview questions must be worded in order to prevent the participants to just answer “yes” or “no” and be able to expand the topic. Bryman (2008) also states that open-ended questions prevent the participant from choosing the answers from a list. Lisa (2011) also states that open-ended interview questions give the participants freedom to answer each questions from their own knowledge and enables the researcher to deeply explore the participants’ feelings and experiences regarding the subject. She states that in-depth interviewing not only involves asking questions but also recording and documenting the responses systematically in order to grasp a deeper understanding. According to Longfield (2004) in-depth interviews should last between 1 to 2 hours based on the patience of the participants and their interest in the interview.

### **3.3. Participants and Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used in this study in order to select the most successful EFL learners who had scored highly in the UAT. Those who had an in-depth knowledge about language learning strategies and could share their successful experiences. Random sampling was avoided due to the fact that only a small percentage of the EFL learners meet the required properties of the target participants in this study thus; it could lead to frustration due to their irrelevant experiences.

In order to conduct this Study, we carefully found 20 successful EFL learners who had scored more than 85% in the UAT without having participated in any classes outside school. The participants all had passed the test with flying colors and had a great perception over the types of strategies they had used. They all study in Top state universities in Iran such as Tehran University, Kharazmi University, Ferdowsi University, Mazandaran University, and Gilan University. Out of these 20 participants, 8 were female and 12 were male. In order to avoid breaching the participants’ guarantee of confidentiality, all of the names reported under the results, are not real.

### **3.4. Data Collection**

In this study, the main method of data collection was In-depth interviews. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011) qualitative researchers greatly rely on in-depth interviewing as a means of data collection. In this study, we have administered an oral, elaborate, and in-depth interview with each participant in order to find out how they learned English and what kind of strategies they applied in their learning process and the university admission test. Field notes and audio recording were also employed and all the data was recorded by a voice recorder for further analysis.

Before conducting the interviews, all participants were provided with the interview questions. Each participant was interviewed individually for approximately 2 hours. We mostly used open-ended questions. This caused the participants to answer follow-up questions and speak freely about their attitudes and experiences and the strategies they applied in their journey to the university admission test and provided them an opportunity to produce answers that were not anticipated.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

In this study, in order to analyze the collected data, we first transcribed the audio data. Then we created a data base of the data by categorizing the data based on vocabulary, grammar, and the reading comprehension. After that we started coding the data by assigning tags and labels to each category in order to identify “chunks” of the data. Then thematic analysis of the rationalized codes was conducted. After that, we generated various reports of the collected data. Finally by thematically evaluating and analyzing these reports, we could satisfy the purpose of the study and the research question.

### **3.6. Data Saturation**

In this study, data was found to be saturated when the number of participants reached 20. In a qualitative research, the researcher may ask how many participants are needed. The answer is the sufficient number is when additional participants don't provide any additional information. In other words the researcher no longer learns very much and the previous findings repeat happening. This phenomenon is called “Saturation”. According to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) saturation can usually happen when approximately 12 participants are in a homogeneous group. Latham (2013) also conducted a study and reach saturation around 11 participants. He also states that it is necessary to go beyond the saturation point by conducting a few more interviews or observations in order to ensure that you have reached saturation. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) state that less than 20 participants in a case study helps the researcher create and maintain a close relationship therefore enhance the open and honest exchange of information.

### **3.7. Establishing Credibility**

In order to ensure the credibility of the findings we have used triangulation and member-checking. Triangulation involves using multiple methods, data sources, observers, or theories in order to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. Different methods such as narrative enquiry were used to check the consistency of the findings. For member-checking, the data, interpretations, and conclusions were shared with the participants in order to clarify what their intentions were, correct errors, and provide additional information if necessary.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

## 4.1. Overview

The purpose of this case study research method was to get an elaborate understanding of the experiences, techniques, and strategies of successful EFL learners who were preparing for the university admission test without access to language institutes. The main aim of this chapter is to present these items. In this chapter, after thematic analysis of the collected data, we will present the strategies and experiences of the participants under four categories that are Vocabulary, Reading Comprehension, Grammar, and General Experiences. The reason for not including writing and speaking is due to the fact that they are not covered in the university admission test, thus it is outside the scope of the current study.

## 4.2. Vocabulary Strategies

### 4.2.1. Visualization

Visualization means relating words to pictures. Using visualization in learning new vocabulary is very important. According to the famous saying “a picture is worth a thousand words”. In this study we found that most of our cases tried to make pictures in their minds, or learn new vocabulary through pictures and visualization techniques. For instance, Mahdi who scored 88% in the university admission test states:

*Whenever I encountered new vocabulary, simple or complex, I did my best to make a picture in my mind in order to make the word heavier in my mind so that word sticks there for ages.*

Another merit that visualization techniques provide is making learning easier and more fun. It also facilitates the recalling process after a long time as well as reducing the time needed to do so, as timing is everything in the university admission test. Regarding this fact, Reza who scored 85% says:

*Learning vocabulary has always been really easy and fun for me because I try to make funny and hilarious images on my mind related to the word that I'm trying to learn. This way, after years of not using the word anywhere, whenever I hear it, I immediately see the picture in my mind and remember the meaning. These pictures help me be instant in remembering.*

Visualization also enables learners to be more creative in their learning and their lifestyle in general. Using picture dictionaries can also help the learners visualize easier. As Soroush who scored 86% says:

*I never learned a single word. I either tried to use a picture dictionary in order to learn it via images, or I tried to create meaningful images related to the target word. This strategy has*

*enabled me to overcome the problem of forgetting words after some years and also helped me be more creative.*

Learning vocabulary by creating good pictures can increase learners' motivation and decrease their fear of learning hard words. As Nafise who scored 92% says:

*Learning vocabulary in its boring and numb form is frustrating and de-motivating. In the social context of Iran which English is not used in the society, these words will little by little become dim and therefore forgotten overtime. But when I learn vocabulary through colorful images-the funnier the better- I tend to remember them even after a very long period of time. I would also be motivated to do so and not be afraid of it.*

#### **4.2.2. Understanding the Words Deeply**

It has been observed and proved that just memorizing the words alone wouldn't be a useful way of learning vocabulary in the long run. Our participants reported that they had fully understood the deep meaning behind the words in order to defeat the vague sense of just being familiar with a word. As Hossein who scored 85% says:

*I had tried to only memorize a word with its translation but after a period of time, I failed to either remember the meaning of the word or use that word in the context. After changing my learning method into fully understanding and perceiving the true meaning of the word, I could easily learn it and use it in the future without trouble. For instance, when I encountered the word 'inject' I found the root of that word which was 'ject' and found other words associated to it such as reject, eject, and etc. this way not only I learnt more words with minimal effort, but also could recognize any form of meaning related the word 'inject'.*

Identifying prefixes and suffixes can also greatly help the learners grasp a deeper understanding and perception of the words and also facilitates the learning process. As Ali who scored 87% states:

*One method that I used to learn new vocabulary was identifying the prefixes and suffixes attached to that word. This greatly helped me grasp a deeper and of course easier understanding the meaning of each word. Learning negative, positive, adverb, adjective, verb, and noun maker prefixes and suffixes greatly decreased the challenge I had to face before learning the new vocabulary.*

### 4.2.3. Learning Chunks

According to linguistics, chunks are referred to a group of words that are used together in a phrase and are related to each other. According to Neuro-linguistics our brain and short term memory has a limited capacity for storing and retrieving single words. But when it comes to storing chunks or phrases that limit will exponentially be lifted. We believe that learning words in chunks helps students learn the meaning of the words in the real situation rather than an isolated one. Regarding this matter, Kamran who scored 95% states:

*One of the most important methods I applied for learning new vocabulary was to learn them in chunks or phrases. This way I could know the whole family of the target word and it was a lot easier and more effective for me to retrieve and use them in the future. For example, when I wanted to learn the word 'turn' I fully learned the collocations of it such as: turn on, turn off, turn down, turn up, turn back, and etc. Each chunk has different meanings but the form is somehow fixed and easier to remember.*

Learning vocabulary in chunks or phrases enables students not only to remember words easier, but also helps them expands their vocabulary faster. As Alireza who scored 92% says:

*Having learnt to utilize chunks and phrases for learning, I could greatly expand my knowledge of vocabulary. If you limit yourself to one single word, not only you will forget it over time, but also you will fail to expand your vocabulary in fashionable way. In my experience, I don't remember losing a word if I had learned it through chunks. For example, when I encountered the word 'do' I collected most of its collocations such as do the dishes, do the laundry, do time, do a favor, do homework, and etc. This method helped me in a way the even 10 or 15 years past the learning time, whenever I heard a single word, I could flashback all or most of the related words or phrases to that word*

Another perk of learning vocabulary in chunks and phrases is being able to use those words appropriately and correctly in the context that is needed. While learning single words will not show the learners how that single word is used in a sentence. As Negin who scored 93% states:

*There was a time that my brain was shutting down because I bombarded it with a lot of single words every day. I could not deploy most of those words in conversations therefore I began to*

*lose a remarkable amount of those words that I had struggled to memorize. But after coming across with the chunks method of learning vocabulary, there was a breakthrough in my brain. Not only I could save those words and phrases in my brain easier, but also I had almost no problems for using them in speaking as well as identifying them in reading texts faster*

#### **4.2.4. Learning Vocabulary from Music**

There are ample samples of cases in which music has greatly helped students learn vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. According to “Mozart effect”, listening to music (classical) helps to increase the performance ability of mental tasks such as learning. In this study, we found that 16, out of 20 cases had used music as a strategy to learn vocabulary in true context. The participants reported that it was one of the most fun and enjoyable ways for them to acquire vocabulary and loved practicing it. It was observed that musical phrases could stick in their minds without time limits. As Haniye who scored 86% says:

*I can't imagine my current vocabulary capacity without music. Music definitely was the greatest way I could learn new words. It was always fun, creative, refreshing, and lively to listen to music to have fun and at the same time, learn new words. In order to learn new words of the songs, I first downloaded the English lyrics of the song in order to get familiar with the dictation and spelling the target words. After that I transferred those words into my own vocabulary note book with their meaning. When it came to practicing them, I always sang the song in order to store the whole phrase in my brain.*

Learning vocabulary by listening to music has also proved to be relaxing, interesting, and motivating but it is important to mention that the right type of music should be selected in order to get the best results. As Matin who scored 85% states:

*I could find a very large amount of useful words, phrases, and expressions by listening to my favorite songs. Listening to music always motivated me to learn English due to the fact that it is something I truly loved to do. In my opinion music adds color to our lives. It is important to use the right type of music in order to learn. In other words, I can't express how relaxing, interesting, and effective it is to learn vocabulary by music but I can say it is a game changer.*

The rhythms and sound patterns of music help that sentence stick on the mind easier and longer and can be an exciting activity for learners to do. As Atefe who scored 92% says:

*I myself as student always looked for the easiest and most interesting ways to learn vocabulary. I think one of the reasons that music was very effective in order to increase my vocabulary span, was that the rhythms and sound patterns of the music can easily stick to your brain and even after finishing listening to that song, it will play itself in your mind over and over and after some time, it would almost be impossible to forget it. So yes, I believe that learning vocabulary through music is by far the most important, effective, and exciting strategy I have ever seen.*

#### **4.2.5. Learning Vocabulary by Watching English Movies and TV Series**

Another way of learning new words that is fun and enjoyable, is watching English language movies and TV series. One of the most important advantages of this strategy is that the words and the knowledge that the students receive are not artificial like some commercial textbooks. The English that is used in most movies is in the real context and situation. It has audio, rhythm, music, visual images, and a story to follow. In this study, we found that our participants could remember some complex words and phrases with a visual image of the scene in the movie that was related to that word or phrase. Regarding this matter, Mahdi who scored 88% states:

*Having almost no access to the real context in which English is used as the first language, I had to turn to English movies and TV series. While watching them, I could feel that I am in the real context and I could follow that movie with interest. I watched each movie at least 3 times. The first time, I watched it with subtitles in order to understand and enjoy the movie without interruption, the second time, I watched the movie with subtitles, then paused it at every important phrase in order to write down the new words or phrases and then attempted to find their meanings. After practicing the new words by myself for a couple of times, I watched the movie for the third time, without subtitles, in order to guess, practice, and evaluate my learning.*

Watching movies to learn vocabulary was followed by a series of steps such as note taking and actively paying attention in order to maximize the efficiency of the process. As Hadi scored 88% says:

*I can dare to say that one of the major reasons that I became so fluent in English, without a need to enroll in English language institutes, was watching English movies and Series. Not only was it an interesting task, but also an easy one. By watching movies, I could feel that I am part of a mission that was being able to learn most of the useful vocabulary of that movie. It's important to mention that choosing the right genre of the movies, watching and listening carefully, constantly taking notes and extracting the target words then practicing them by associating those words or phrases to the related scene of the movie should really be prioritized.*

Watching movies creates a virtual context in which real English language is used and this fact helps students substantially. The English subtitles of the movie are another mean of facilitating the learners understanding. As Narges who scored 92% states:

*They say it is best to learn the vocabulary in the real context that it is used. Aside being abroad in countries that speak English in the society, which is not a realistic option for most Iranian students, which way is better than watching English movies in order to learn in the real context. I always watch a movie with English subtitles, then write the important vocabulary, after that I find their meanings and start practicing them while watching that movie. It helped me to have no problems learning, remembering, and using those vocabularies in the future.*

Watching movies also proved to facilitate the long term storage and the correct usage of the words. It also clarifies different intonations which convey different messages. As Reza who scored 85% says:

*We have all heard that actions speak louder than words. I applied this saying to leaning new words. I personally learnt a lot easier when I saw in which context and situation in with what tone and intonation, the target word is utilized. Before watching movies, I was just able to memorize the words with their meanings but I had no luck using them or recognizing them in readings or conversations. But after learning by watching movies, I could easily and interestingly learn each words usage which in return helped its long term storage.*

#### **4.2.6. Organizing related words and their families**

In this study, we found that most of the participants had categorized and organized what they had learnt. It is very important and of course more efficient to

organize what you are learning in order to facilitate storing, retrieving, and using those words. Regarding this matter, Hossein who scored 85% states:

*Organization is the means of being successful. Imagine your house with no organization, everything is scattered everywhere. What happens if you want to find and use something? The answer is simple, either you can't, or it will take a very long time with high efforts to do so. Learning vocabulary is somehow the same. Organizing and categorizing made me a lot more successful both in learning and using new vocabulary. For example, in my vocabulary notebook, there is a part for diseases and illness and most of the related words and phrases are under that category. I believe we can't use what we have learned, if we don't organize them well.*

It is without doubt that organization makes it a lot easier to access the required data as well as being motivated to add to this organization. As Nahid who scored 87% says:

*I organized each word into a specific group such as peach for fruits and loan for finances. After that whenever I came across a new word, I willingly explored other words that are related to this one. This strategy helped me build a chain of words that are related to each other and made it easier for me to remember and use them in the future.*

#### **4.2.7. Using Effective Textbooks for Learning Vocabulary**

It is absolutely true that there is no single “best” textbook. But there are some books that are more effective, up-to-date, well-organized, and need related than other books that are merely published for commercial purposes and making money. We found that some of the participants had utilized different textbooks such as Oxford word skills and Oxford Visual Dictionary in order to learn vocabulary. As Zahra who scored 86% Says:

*It was really hard for me to find good books for vocabulary learning. In the beginning, so many people recommended to use 504 and 1100 books. I tried them and failed. Those books did not help me at all and wasted a remarkable amount of my time and energy and led me to frustration. After some research, I found that I had to learn the vocabulary that is truly needed for me not the ones that are absolutely unnecessary. For this matter, I used Oxford word skills book which had categorized helpful words and*



*had provided lots of nice tasks. And as far as I'm a visual learner, I also used Oxford Visual Dictionary in order to learn new words.*

Another book which proved to be effective in the field of providing synonyms and antonyms for the learners was “Fast Vocab for Konkur”. As Milad who scored 87% states:

*For the vocabulary in the university admission test, I studied 'Fast Vocab for Konkur' by Mehrdad Zangieh Vandi which had introduced useful words for konkur test and had provided ample samples of synonyms and antonyms. That book really made a difference for me.*

It was observed that “Word Power Made Easy” book has greatly helped students learn vocabulary by providing them more than 1000 words as well as necessary tips and game activities. The words are also presented in their appropriate context. These result in better motivation and attitude toward learning vocabulary. As Hooman who scored 85% Says:

*One book that really made it easy for me to learn vocabulary was 'Word Power Made Easy' which provided an interesting and fun way of learning over 1000 frequent words. It is important to mention that this book had a great amount of learning tips which explained how to learn vocabulary. This book had lots of games and activities which made it absolutely not boring for me. Each word was presented in an appropriate context and situation with proper explanation in order to enable learners to fully understand that word and its usage.*

#### **4.2.8. Personalization of Words**

Almost all of our participants showed that they had related most of the vocabulary they had learned, to their own personal lives and backgrounds. In other words they had tried to use those words in different sentences, situations and context. This helped them retrieve and use the words more easily. As Fatemeh who scored 92% says:

*I have associated most of the words that I know, to my own personal life. For example, when I encountered the word 'Ace', I remembered all of the situations that I had aced something and tried to make sentences expressing those situations. This way, I personally connected with words and it helped me store and retrieve them much easier.*

We believe that strange becomes forgotten while familiar stays for a long time. It also applies to vocabulary. Making vocabulary personal helps it become familiar. As Nahid who scored 87% states:

*Personalization of the words that I was learning helped me grasp the whole meaning, function, and context of the words. If something is strange to me, I am most likely to forget it over time, but if it is personal, I will remember it for ages.*

#### **4.2.9. Contextual Analysis for Inferring Word Meaning**

While encountering new words in a specific context, it is very important for learners to analyze the context in order to guess the meaning of the words by using contextual clues which include synonyms, antonyms, explanations, examples and illustrations. It was proved that making some efforts to guess the meaning of the words either correct or wrong, has a much higher success rate in comparison with just checking the meaning of the words via a dictionary. Regarding this matter, Alireza who scored 92% says:

*If I want to bring an example, I would say imagine someone gives you some money and you have made zero effort to earn it. The odds are you will spend it fast and without consideration. But when you earn money by making efforts and allocating time and energy, you will be very conscious not to lose it. I applied the same experience to my vocabulary learning. I believe that if you check the dictionary without making efforts to use the context for finding the meaning, you will lose that word easily soon. In most contexts, I can easily guess a specific or general idea of the words using synonyms, antonyms, suffixes and prefixes, or*

*examples. If none of them helped me find out or guess the meaning, I turn to my dictionary as the last resort.*

In this study we found that making effort to learn vocabulary by guessing or inferring the meaning rather than just checking them from the dictionary has proved to be somewhat hard but it guarantees the fact that those words are not going to be forgotten easily. As Atefe who scored 92% says:

*I have evaluated and tested myself. I have seen that I could easily forget a word if I simply just check its meaning by the dictionary. On the other hand, if I guess the meaning of the words in the real context or situations, using various clues, I would never forget it easily. I think if you work hard for piling up your vocabulary knowledge, it is not going to be easy to lose them over time, but if you make less effort to do so, it is probable to lose them easily because it could not stick in your mind well.*

Inferring the meaning of the words enables learners to be relatively independent of using dictionaries for understanding the words. As Ali who scored 87% says:

*I personally believe that the purpose of communication or reading texts is to understand and perceive what message is being transferred. Doing so did not require me to know the exact meaning of the words. I just needed to have an understanding of the meanings. Right now I can understand and correctly use thousands of words in their appropriate context but I may not be able to translate the exact meaning of those words in Persian.*

#### **4.2.10. Using Vocabulary Applications on Smart Phones**

With the advancement of technology, hundreds of thousands of books are now made into digital applications and software. Our participants reported that various android apps had an effective role in their vocabulary learning. Regarding this fact, Nafise who scored 92% says:

*It is very hard or nearly impossible to carry heavy textbooks wherever you go. But if that textbook is on your cell phone or smart phone, then you have access to it everywhere and these apps have a lot better environments which are not boring and their organizations are also better. I have used many apps on my phone such as vocabulary 101, word master, picture vocabulary, and etc....*

### **4.3. Grammar Strategies**

#### **4.3.1. Inductive and Deductive Grammar Learning**

Most of our participants reported that they had learned grammar inductively, while some of them had done it deductively or a mixture of both. Inductive grammar learning involves students to explore and analyze a sentence or phrase in order to find out the rule. It involves lots of examples and practices. On the other hand, deductive grammar learning just provides the students with the rules and explains it to them. Reza who scored 85% says:

*I have always tried to find out the grammatical rules on my own. In order to do so, I carefully paid attention to the context and the meaning of that structure either in textbooks or in movies. If someone explains something to me, I tend to forget it sooner but if I find something out on my own, it will stick lifelong. However, I had encountered some structures that were very hard or nearly impossible to guess by examples and patterns, thus I had to turn to explanations and the general rule itself.*

Inductive grammar learning has proved to be more effective in some cases because once again; more effort meant longer storage and easier retrieval. As Hooman who scored 85% states:

*Discovering grammatical rules on my own was a lot more effective than being presented the rule by a book or a teacher. It takes more time and effort to do so but in the long run, it is a lot more efficient. Discovering grammar rules by movies or texts in textbooks enabled me to become a critical thinker and have a deeper understanding of the language.*

#### **4.3.2. Learning Parts of Speech**

There are eight parts of speech in English that every student must be familiar with in order to learn grammar successfully. These parts of speech are: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. As Haniye who scored 86% says:

*The first thing I did when learning new vocabulary, even before finding the meaning, was learning the part of speech of that word. This helped me to identify the correct place of the words in*

*the sentences, and vice versa, knowing the parts of speech helped me have a deeper understanding of the words and sentences.*

Recognizing the parts of speech of the words also helps the process of generating meaningful and grammatically correct sentences. As Alireza who scored 92% says:

*Knowing the parts of speech of words is the most important step in generating new meaningful sentences with those words in which all words are in their correct places.*

### **4.3.3. Using Effective Textbooks for Learning Grammar**

As it was mentioned before, there is no single best textbook. However, there are some books that provide a better success rate according to the learners needs. It was reported that “Comprehensive English Grammar” book explained grammatical rules and structures in a simple language which most students can easily understand. As Atefe who scored 92% says:

*One book that helped me the most for learning grammar was ‘Comprehensive English Grammar’ by Kamran Motamedi and Maziyar Mousavi. This book elaborately teaches and explains grammar and provides ample samples of tasks and practices. The language of the book is quite simple and understandable to everyone.*

Another series of books that have proven to be very successful in the field of English for the university admission test are Shahab Anari’s English books for konkur. These books aim at systematically teaching almost every step that is required for the university admission test. As Matin who scored 85% says:

*Among the grammar books I have seen, Shahab Anari’s Grammar book was the most successful, comprehensive, and effective book. This book just knows the deal. It aims for fast grammar learning and techniques for konkur. I believe this book is the key for being successful in the university admission test.*

Surprisingly, the above book had been used and studied by 19 out of 20 learners and they all agree with Matin and believe that Shahab Anari’s books are a great source for konkur test.

In the topic of providing ample samples and exercises of the related grammatical points, English Grammar in use and Grammar in use books have proved to be efficient. As Zahra who scored 86% states:

*For learning grammar, English Grammar in use and Grammar in use books helped me a lot for discovering new rules and grammatical points. They also provided me with lots of exercises and task and practice makes perfect.*

#### **4.3.4. Learning Grammar by Watching English Movies**

Last but not least, almost all of our participants agreed on the effect of watching movies on grammar development. It is also important to mention that watching movies was quite effective in almost every skill of English language except for writing. As Negin who scored 93% says:

*There is almost nowhere in Iran for learners to be exposed to native English usage except for movies and TV series. By watching TV series, ones various skills such as vocabulary, grammar, listening, and speaking would greatly improve and this is an undeniable fact. When I watched movies, I carefully observed when and where and why a specific structure was used and tried to apply it in my own life.*

As mentioned before, learning in the real context is the best way of learning and watching movies in order to learn grammar is no exception. As Kamran who scored 95% says:

*Many people say if you want to learn a language with almost the highest success rate, you must go to the real context in which language is being used. In Iran, I had only access to movies and TV series as the real context. When I watched them, I carefully took notes and wrote down my understanding of the structures and then searched to find out whether they were true or not. Most of them were true, and if not, I would find the true grammatical rule using textbooks or the internet.*

#### **4.3.5. Understanding the Logic behind Each Grammatical Rule**

Out of 20 participants, we could not find even 1 single case in which they did not know the logic behind using every single grammatical point or tense they knew. If one doesn't know the logic behind grammatical structures then it would be impossible to use them in the appropriate context. Regarding this matter, Nahid who scored 87% states:

*If you learn grammar, without knowing when, where, and why to use that grammar, then you have not learned it at all. You just know a notion of that grammar. I have always tried to learn the logic behind grammar by comparing it to my own language. For example I have always asked myself if I want to say this sentence in English and convey this message, what is the most proper grammatical structure? Even I didn't have any questions; I made them while learning new grammatical points.*

Knowing the logic behind grammatical rules enables students to deeply understand the rationale for using each grammatical point as well as enabling them to use them in the correct context in order to convey their message in the best way possible. As Masoud who scored 88% says:

*If you mistake using grammatical points you either you will not convey your message or you will convey a totally different one. I tried my best to understand the rationale behind each grammar point and after that started comparing these grammatical points with each other. For example what is the difference between saying a sentence in simple future and present progressive? After finding the answer, I had a deeper understanding of the whole English language.*

#### **4.4. Reading Comprehension Strategies**

##### **4.4.1. Improving Vocabulary**

It has been proved that reading different texts is one good source of obtaining new vocabulary. However, when it comes to comprehension, our participants had the same idea in common which was improving their vocabulary knowledge prior to reading. As Soroush who scored 86% says:

*Imagine someone gives you a Japanese text and asks you to read it with the supposition that you already know a little Japanese. But if your Japanese vocabulary knowledge is very low, you are most likely to fail understanding that text. The same applies to English. I tried to work on my vocabulary enrichment before I started comprehending texts and after a while I could use texts as a source of obtaining new words as well as understanding those texts.*

It was reported that there should be a logical order for learning each skill for the university admission test and in that order, Vocabulary learning precedes reading comprehension. As Mahdi who scored 88% states:

*I had an arbitrary order on my own mind regarding the priority of learning each skill such as vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. I believe that vocabulary is the first priority and when it reaches an acceptable level, we can start reading comprehensions. If students start reading before they had developed acceptable vocabulary knowledge, either it would be really disappointing, or frustrating and time consuming for them to comprehend different texts. I compared this situation with someone who wants to start fishing. He has bait, a fishing rod and a good place to fish. But before trying to do so, he must learn some fishing techniques if he wants to be successful. Those fishing techniques can be vocabulary knowledge. The more you know, the merrier you'll be with the rate of your reading comprehension.*

#### **4.4.2. Using Effective Textbooks for Reading Comprehension**

In this study, we found that our participants had used various reading books in order to improve their reading comprehension. Some of them shared using one single book while others had used other books. However, almost all of the books that were selected, had carefully paid attention and considered the type of texts and practices and also had some good learning strategies. “Steps to understanding” proved to help students greatly with their reading comprehension as it provided them with 4 levels of texts in one book. The texts were rather short and interesting. As Hossein who scored 85% says:

*One book that I found really amazing for reading comprehension and vocabulary enrichment was ‘Steps to Understanding’. This book consists of four parts which are basic, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. Each text is less than half a page but*



*has a lot to say. After the reading text, there are various exercises and practice for evaluation.*

“Active” series have also been very successful for reading comprehension because of teaching lots of reading strategies as well as scientific texts. They also involve students in pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities. As Milad who scored 87% states:

*I followed a series of 5 volume books called ‘Active’ readings. These books not only had great readings about different topics which enriched my general knowledge, but also taught me lots of good reading strategies. These books also follow a nice structure regarding pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading.*

‘Reading Explorer’ books which are sponsored by national geography were greatly appreciated by the learners because they are definitely not boring and provide students with videos related to the reading passages in order to provide visual aid for learning. As Negin who scored 93% says:

*For my money, the best reading book that I have ever seen and studied is ‘Reading Explorer’ by David Bohlke and Nancy Douglas. These books are consisted of 6 volumes which are content based and describe national geography videos. Each lesson has two reading texts and one video which is totally optional to watch. The texts in these books are related to the real world subjects, culture, travel, science, exploration, discovery, and etc... which really motivated me to learn new readings and increase my comprehension.*

#### **4.4.3. Reading for Fun**

It is believed that if you have fun doing something, you will be more willing to repeat that that work and the chances of recurrence are high. Most of our cases reported that no one had forced them to read texts and they themselves wanted to do so in order to have fun or relax. As Hadi who scored 88% says:

*Nothing is harder than studying by force. I always studied in a fun way in order to make that experience joyful and learn something at the same time. The type texts I chose to study were mostly comic and sitcom. This helped me remember what I had read for very long periods of time.*

It was also reported that learning for fun removes negative factors such as stress and boredom. As Narges who scored 92% states:

*It is an undeniable fact that making learning fun is the best way of learning. When something is fun, there are no negative factors around and everything is just positive. I just read for fun and pleasure, and after some time I became a professional reader with lots of vocabulary and reading knowledge which I could use in my speaking and writing.*

#### **4.4.4. Establishing Goals before Reading**

It is important to know the purpose for reading a text before reading. For instance do you need to get a general idea about the text or are you looking for any specific information? Knowing these goals before reading helps you utilize the most proper reading skills. As Ali who scored 87% states:

*One of the key factors that helped me a lot either during the university admission test or before it, was knowing the purpose of what I was going to read. This helped me save a lot of time and energy and also avoid concentrating on the irrelevant data. One of the ways to find out the purpose was to look at the questions regarding that reading text in order to know exactly what to look for. Another advantage of knowing my purpose was being able to determine the studying place, for example if I were going to read for fun, I would do it everywhere such as parks or in front of the TV, but if I was going to read for more academic purposes, I had to be more ready and provide a more academic learning place such as a quiet room for more concentration.*

#### **4.4.5. Asking Questions while Reading**

If readers start asking questions while reading, it means that their brains are engaged and they are following the text. Asking questions also motivates students to look for the answers they need with more motivation. All of these lead to more understanding and deeper comprehension of the texts. As Negin who scored 93% says:

*In order to increase my understanding of the texts, I paused between sentences and asked myself some questions in order to know what just happened or what might happen in the coming sentences. This strategy helped me to get engaged more with the text and provided me better results at understanding the meaning of the text.*

Asking questions while reading also enables students to have a chance to stop and refresh during long and boring texts. It can also increase their concentration and perception of the text. As Atefe who scored 92% says:

*When I want to read a text, I imagine myself as a reading supervisor who wants to evaluate that piece of text. In order to do so, I stop and pose some questions, try to answer them, or find the answers and then continue to read. This enables me to have a chance to stop and refresh during long or boring texts, and stops me from any panic attacks due to the hardness of the text. Another advantage of this strategy is helping me focus more on what I'm reading and adding it to my general knowledge.*

#### **4.4.6. Engaging Imagination while Reading**

Creating a picture or visualizing what you read is a very important strategy in reading. In the current study, we found that our participants created a movie in their minds of the story that they were reading. Visualization greatly enhanced their comprehension and facilitated their ability to store and to retrieve the data related to the texts. As Kamran who scored 95% says:

*My purpose of reading different texts was to digest the whole text in my brain for future use. In order to do so, I visualized and created an imaginary movie in my head about what I was reading. As I mentioned before, learning by pictures was a lot more effective for me than just learning by words. When I just read a text I may forget it easily but when I watch a movie, I will not forget the scenes of that movie for ages. The same applies for reading comprehension and that is where visualization comes in.*

Imagination also enables visual learners to enhance their comprehension. As Milad who scored 87% states:

*So many students like me, are visual learners. Even if you are not a visual learner, it is undeniable that what you imagine can be stored and understood easier than what you just read. One of the key factors to my success regarding reading comprehension was creating creative images and situations about what I was reading and it greatly enhanced my comprehension.*

#### 4.4.7. Read Useful Texts

Selecting what you read should be done with care and consideration. The participants in this study reported that it is essential to select valuable texts to read that offer something to learn rather than spending time on what you don't need or what is not useful. As Fatemeh who scored 92% states:

*In my opinion, reading is like shopping. It is not rational to buy what you don't need or what is not valuable. I have seen so many of my friends who waste their time and energy reading useless texts such as American Fashion or Singers Trends in the United States. In my opinion these topics have nothing of value to teach. I personally tried to choose something that could add to my general knowledge of the world that I'm living in.*

It was proved that reading scientific and academic texts are a lot more useful for the university admission test. As Nahid who scored 87% says:

*Reading about Sponge Bob or Ben Ten doesn't teach you much for academic purposes. They are good but for pre-teens. I merely selected scientific texts which enriched me both in vocabulary as well as scientific knowledge. Konkur is not about reading fun texts or irrelevant stuff that they teach in the institutes. It is about science and academic matters.*

Reading unnecessary text will not help students in the university admission test. It is observed that so many students spend much time on unnecessary texts which are not fruitful for them at all. Academic and scientific texts have once again proved to be most effective for university admission test preparation. As Reza who scored 85% says:

*I don't say read funny texts, I say read the texts that have something to say and offer something to learn. If had read a text about American hotels, I would definitely not use anything in that text for my Konkur test. So learners must be on high alert about what they choose to read. In my experience, I studied lots of funny texts but out off most of them, I learned a lesson. After a while I shifted to academic and scientific texts in order to maximize my chances in the academic society.*

#### 4.4.8. Predicting, Scanning, and Skimming

Good readers often use different contextual clues in order to predict what they are reading and this way they engage more and also increase their understanding of the text. Scanning refers to finding certain information in the text by moving your eyes quickly in order to find that specific information. In scanning we don't read the whole text. This helps save time while looking for information in texts.

Skimming is a way of getting a general idea about the text by reading the main ideas of the text very quickly. In skimming we don't need to read word by word. We just read the important parts which gives us the most amount of information. It is a good way of knowing what something is about. As Narges who scored 92% says:

*Timing was everything for me in the university admission test. So many students are afraid of the reading comprehension part in the test because there are huge texts with difficult vocabulary and difficult questions. But the solution here is simple; by carefully scanning and skimming in a text you can easily find your answers and save a very remarkable amount of time.*

Predicting what is going to happen next while reading engages the brain more and makes the learners more excited. Scanning and skimming once again proved to save more time for the learners. As Negin who scored 93% says:

*While reading a text, predicting about what is going to happen can engage your brain more and can make reading more exciting. About saving time while reading the texts specially in the university admission test, scanning and skimming were really a life saver for me due to the fact that I could minimize the time of answering those questions and commit my extra time to the questions that I had problems in other parts.*

Scanning and skimming also proved to decrease learners' frustration and increase their motivation. As Ali who scored 87% says:

*It was very frustrating for me to read the whole text if I just needed to find a specific piece of information such as a date, city and etc. But when I administered scanning and skimming strategies, I was more motivated in reading texts and my time and energy was greatly saved.*

## 4.5. Personal Experiences Strategies

### 4.5.1. Motivation and Determination

It is without doubt that when you are motivated and determined to do something, you will do it and nothing can stop you. In the case of the university admission test, we found that every single one of our cases was motivated to study. Their motivation factors were outside the scope of this study but as far as we are concerned, no force from the outside or the inside was exerted on them. All of them had great determination and perseverance marching towards their goal which was success in the university admission test. As Alireza scored 92% says:

*I had plans for my future. Since childhood, I had learned that nobody is going to just give you success. You have to fight for it. I did so by imagining the great sense of satisfaction after this victory which was conquering the konkur test and going to a good university. Unfortunately most students either don't recognize their goals or simply are motivated or determined enough to fight for what they believe in.*

### 4.5.2. Using Previous UAT Questions

After a short but elaborate review of the questions each year, we found that most of the questions tend to recur in different shapes and forms. Our participants had already known this fact and had practiced the previous years' questions so many times in order to master it and reduce their stress levels. As Kamran who scored 95% says:

*I had printed konkur test questions regarding the past 15 years. It means I had put myself in the situation of konkur for 15 times before I actually took part in the real deal. Practicing those questions greatly enhanced my confidence and reduced my stress level as well as making me notice my weak points and giving me a chance to improve them.*

Using previous konkur test questions also proved to provide students with lots of experience and helped them avoid failing. As Zahra who scored 86% states:

*Sometimes if you want to win, you need to fail. That is what I believe in. as the famous saying 'the master has failed more times than the beginner has even tried'. But I did not fail in the real konkur test. I failed in so many situations at home that included using previous years' questions and learned my lesson. After falling I learned to fly.*

### 4.5.3. Using other Successful Learners Experiences and Strategies

It was not out of the blue to find that most of our participants had asked other successful learners help and experience in order to apply them in their own learning. As Nafise who scored 92% says:

*Asking other top students for help and advice not only encouraged me to study hard, but also acted as a ladder for me to climb a wall of success. In other words, it would have been much harder if I had to discover some strategies on my own.*

Other top students' experiences enable other learners to carefully select their own methods and minimize their chances of failing and maximize their success rate. As Milad who scored 87% states:

*Since childhood, I was told that if you want to risk failing and learning a lesson, then do without asking for advice. I believe that when I asked other successful students experiences and failures, I will increase my chances of success as well as motivation due to the fact that I have been told most ways of failing and now I know nothing but successful methods.*

## 4.6. Summary

In this chapter we presented the reports of four categories which were Vocabulary, Grammar, Reading Comprehension, and General Experiences. We found that most of our participants almost shared the same story while preparing for the university admission test.

For vocabulary learning, we found that Visualization and affiliating words to images was a very important strategy for the learners due to the fact that a picture is worth a thousand words. After that, we found that Learning Vocabulary from Music and by watching movies and TV series had a great effect on the maximization of the learning rate. Organizing related words and their families, using effective textbooks, making the words personal, contextual analysis for inferring word meaning, and using vocabulary applications on Smart Phones were other strategies used by learners in order to succeed in their vocabulary learning process. In the Grammar part, we found that inductive grammar learning was preferred to deductive grammar learning. Inductive grammar learning involves students to explore and analyze a sentence or phrase in order to find out the rule and involves lots of examples and practices. On the other hand, deductive grammar learning just provides the students with the rules and explains it. We also found that learning the parts of speech, using effective textbooks, watching English movies, and understanding the logic behind each grammatical rule was other strategies used by the participants in order to increase their grammar knowledge.

For reading comprehension, the participants reported that improving vocabulary prior to reading, using effective textbooks, reading for fun, establishing goals before reading, asking questions while reading, engaging imagination while Reading, Choosing Precious Tests, predicting, scanning, and skimming are extremely helpful and essential for their successful reading comprehension.

Finally, in the Personal experiences part, we found that every single one of our cases was motivated to study. All of them were greatly determined and persevered in marching towards their goal which was success in the university admission test. They also reported using previous years' konkur questions in order to defy their fears and stress as well as identifying their weaknesses and trying to fix them.



**Chapter 5**  
**Discussion and Conclusion**

## **5.1. Overview**

In this chapter we will compare and contrast the findings of this study with the previous studies and after that we will come to a conclusion.

## **5.2. Discussion of the Findings**

The results of this study are in agreement with Naiman (1976), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Mitits and Gavriilidou (2016), Alfian (2016), who found that successful students follow a series of learning strategies in the appropriate way, due to the fact that all of our participants followed a set of language learning strategies in order to succeed. Rubin (1975) suggested that successful language learners are willing to learn and they are good guessers and have a strong willing to communicate. They are also not limited and not afraid to make mistakes. They would look on forms and patterns in order to analyze the rest of the text. They would take advantage of every single learning opportunity and practice and monitor their speech as well as paying attention to meaning. In a study conducted by Rubin (1975) she found that successful language learners tend to use some learning strategies such as: making reasonable guesses when not certain, making an effort to communicate and learn from it, finding strategies for solving the limitations and problems in the target language interaction, practicing the language whenever possible, monitoring their own and others speech, paying attention to form and grammar as well as paying attention to meaning. According to the results of her study, these strategies are applied in order to facilitate, improve and enhance the learning process. These results are mostly in agreements with the results of the current study. These are in agreement with our participants who used guessing strategies for vocabulary and reading and grammar.

Miller (2000) conducted a study on 125 German students in order to find out whether language learning strategies had been effective in their foreign language learning by interviews. She found that using language learning strategies brought greater experience and success and this fact was facilitated by individual differences. The participants in this study had all reported that language learning strategies were the most important factor in their success.

Regarding Gender, we found that there was no significance difference between the type of strategies that our male and female participants applied. This is in agreement with Alfian (2016) who conducted a study on 8 high school students in Indonesia in order to find different strategies used by these learners. He found that there was no difference in the kind of strategies used by female and male learners. In the translation part, we found that the participants weren't willing to translate directly. On the other hand, they tended to guess and use context clues to clarify the meaning. This fact is in agreement with Abraham and Van (1987) who conducted a study and found that

successful learners applied more strategies than less successful learners and tended to guess the meaning, paraphrase and use clarification strategies.

It is also in agreement with Phillips (1991) who also conducted a study on 141 Asian adult English learning students in the United States and found that more proficient learners applied more paraphrasing, goal setting, and avoided any word by word translations. The prediction and guessing strategies in this study are also in agreement with Komura and Hamamatsu (1991) who conducted a study in Japan on 397 university students and 181 high school students and found that the participants' well performance was due to using guessing strategies. Grenfell (2004), Cohen (2008), Macaro (2001), and Oxford (2011) stated that teaching only a specific set of language learning strategies to less successful learners might demotivate them because it would limit their own creativity and self variation and also "the human capacity to act on informed choices" (Benson & Cooker, 2013, p.7). This is contradictory with the current study. In this study not only our learners were motivated to use other successful learners' strategies, but also looked at these strategies as ladders that would help them climb the wall of success. Regarding this matter, Nafise who scored 92% explicitly reported that applying other successful learners' strategies worked as a ladder to climb the wall of success. However if those researchers meant only and only "a specific set" not various sets, which was not clarified by them, it would make more sense.

One of the unique findings of this study was personalization of words. Almost all of our participants showed that they had related most of the vocabulary they had learned, to their own personal lives and backgrounds. In other words they had tried to use those words in different sentences, situations and context. This helped them retrieve and use the words more easily. We found that strange becomes forgotten while familiar stays for a long time. It also applies to vocabulary. Making vocabulary personal helped it become familiar

### **5.3. Conclusion**

This study was conducted in order to identify the experience and strategies of Iranian successful EFL learners who have a very high score in the university admission test without having participated to any commercial or extra-curricular class outside school or in the institutes. After concise and precise interviews with the participants and thematically analyzing the collected data, we found that first of all, Motivation, Determination, and Perseverance were among the main factors which paved the way for our participants to succeed in the university admission test with flying colors. Secondly, we identified various strategies that the participants had used and deleted the ones that they had in common. These strategies were reported in four parts including, Vocabulary, Grammar, Reading Comprehension, and personal Experiences. We observed that Visualization and affiliating words to images, learning vocabulary from music and by watching movies, Organizing related words and their families, using

effective textbooks, making the words personal, contextual analysis for inferring word meaning, and using vocabulary applications on Smart Phone, were some of the most important strategies that the participants had used regarding their vocabulary knowledge.

In the grammar part, we found that despite the fact that both inductive and deductive grammar learning were mixed in order to maximize their learning, but inductive grammar learning was preferred by most of the participants. It was also important to mention that learning the parts of speech, using effective textbooks, watching English movies, and understanding the logic behind each grammatical rule, were other types of strategies which had facilitated the learning for our participants. The most important strategies that were used by our learners for reading comprehension was improving vocabulary prior to reading, using effective textbooks, reading for fun, establishing goals before reading, asking questions while reading, engaging imagination while Reading, Choosing Precious Texts, predicting, scanning, and skimming.

Finally, it is to be concluded that in order to succeed in the university admission test in Iran, students don't necessarily need to participate in expensive institutional test classes which most of them have commercial purposes and more importantly success is not guaranteed. If learners and parents want to decrease their costs and expenses or if they simply cannot afford those expensive classes which don't prove to be very fruitful, they can learn effective learning strategies and use them in the appropriate context. The results of this study showed that what our participants had learned, stuck in their brains for ages and this is contradictory to the fact that what most students learn in the institute is forgotten within a short period of time with the feature of being used in the future.

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## چکیده

موفقیت در قسمت زبان آزمون ورودی دانشگاه وابسته به پهنا و عمق مهارت های نوشتاری داوطلبان خصوصاً مهارت های واژگان ، گرامر، و درک مطلب می باشد. بهبود و توسعه ی این مهارت ها نیز وابسته به آگاهی زبان آموزان و استفاده ی مناسب آنان از راهبرد ها و استراتژی های یادگیری زبان می باشد. از آنجایی که بیشترین راهبرد ها وابسته به طرز فکر یا شیوه های ویژه ی دانش آموزان هستند، هدف این تحقیق بررسی راهبردهای استفاده شده توسط دانش آموزان موفق در قسمت زبان انگلیسی آزمون ورودی دانشگاه می باشد. برای تحقق این هدف، ۲۰ داوطلب که درصد بالای ۸۵ را در آزمون ورودی دانشگاه کسب کرده بودند بطور هدفمند نمونه گیری شده و راهبرد های استفاده شده توسط آنان از طریق مصاحبه های کیفی کشف شدند. سپس دیدگاه های داوطلبان بطور ویژه به واژه نوشته شده و بطور ریشه ای مورد بررسی و تحلیل قرار گرفتند تا استراتژی ها و راهبردهای حقیقی استفاده شده توسط آنها برای این آزمون حساس کشف شوند. تحلیل ریشه ای دیدگاه های داوطلبان، تکنیک ها و استراتژی های عملی و واقع بینانه ای را آشکار کرد. نتایج این مطالعه ارتباط ویژه ای با تمامی افراد وابسته به آزمون حساس ورودی دانشگاه دارد. آگاهی داوطلبان از این راهبرد های یادگیری، نقش بسیار زیادی در عملکرد آنان در این آزمون و رشته ی تحصیلی آینده آنان دارد.

*کلمات کلیدی: راهبرد های یادگیری زبان ، مطالعه ی موردی ، آزمون ورودی دانشگاه (کنکور*



گروه زبان انگلیسی

پایان نامه کارشناسی ارشد آموزش زبان

بررسی راهبردها و تجربیات یادگیری زبان دانش آموزان موفق در کنکور

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