Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Language Learning Strategies and Cognitive Psychology

In recent years, the focus has changed from teaching to learning. In light of this, different kinds of strategies that learners utilize to know and memorize information interest researchers in foreign language teaching. As Nyikos and Oxford (1993) argue that even though the teachers use the best ways in teaching, it is the role of the students that learn something actually. Therefore, the main focus needs to be placed on learners. One sphere of research dealing with learners and learning is language learning strategies (LLSs) which developed in the 1970s.

Studies about reading strategies mostly focused on identifying reading strategies, however, the present study intends to carry out a research on reading strategies from a different view. It aims to conduct a research on reading strategies in terms of cognitive and metacognitive strategies suggested by O'Malley and Chamot (1990,) which is based on cognitive learning models in an Iranian EFL context for high school learners. Further, the present study aims to find out the relationships between students' gender, level of English proficiency and strategy use focusing on their overall strategy use and the way they employ strategies.

1.2. Language Learning Strategies and Metacognition

A number of studies indicate that metacognition determines students' success in second language learning (e.g. Anderson, 1991; Chamot et al. 1999; Oxford, 2001; Wenden, 1991). Researchers also study the use of reading strategies by second language learners and the impact of reading strategy training on reading comprehension (Carrell et al. 1989; Cohen 1998; Harris, 2003). Metacognition needs to be taught to cause them to employ reading strategies effectively (Anderson, 1991; Carrell, 1998). Researchers in second language learning intends not only to find out the use of reading strategies by learners (Anderson, 1991; Block, 1989; Zhang, 2001), but also they are willing to find out the impacts of reading strategy training on reading performance (e.g. Carrell et al., 1989; Janzen and Stoller, 1998). Further, students' self-efficacy affects positively on their strategy use (Zimmerman & Martinez-pons, 1990). Although self-efficacy has a positive impact on learners' strategy use, what is still a moot point is whether explicit strategy instruction enhances learners' self-efficacy.

1.3. Background of the Study

In recent years, the shift has changed from teachers to learners. Cohen (1998) argued that learning strategies are considered important to put the responsibility for learning on the learners. Thus, it is concluded the shift has changed from language to the language learner. What is really important is what the learner does which has been contributed to language learning strategies research. However, little work been carried out to understand high

school learners' reading strategies in relation to gender and proficiency in an Iranian EFL context by employing a mixed method design that adopts both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Little research has been conducted on mtacognitive aspect of language learning strategies (Baumann, Jones, & Seiser-Kessel, 1993; Carrell, 1989). For example, Carrell, (1989) indicted that there was a positive relationship between metacognitive strategies and reading comprehension. However, little research has been conducted on cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies in an Iranian EFL context.

Certain cultural contexts determine the use of certain language leaning strategies (Oxford, 1989, 1996). Despite the great number of studies on language learning strategy use, research on the impact of Iranian EFL contexts on strategy use is scarce.

Some studies have indicated that strategy instruction has a positive impact on language learning (e.g. Brown & Palincsar, 1982; Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary & Robbins, 1999; Loranger, 1997; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Further a number of studies shows that self-efficacy level is positively related to strategy use (e.g. Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1989; Zimmerman, 1990). However, a review of the literature reveals a dearth of studies on the effects of explicit teaching of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies on reading comprehension and self-efficacy, particularly in the context of Iran.

1.4. Statement of the Problem

An array of cognitive strategies will facilitate learners' speaking, reading, writing, and listening activities (Chamot, 2004). Furthermore, even though it is a good idea to classify language learning strategies, research on learning strategies needs to study the impact of certain contexts of learning on strategy use. Therefore, the impact of Iranian EFL learning context on strategy use is studied in the present study.

Strategy training encourages the learners by improving their awareness of language learning strategies (Rasekh & Ranjbary, 2003). The aim of strategy training is to increase learners' consciousness over their leaning (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999). Thus the researcher intends to teach strategies to the learners to increase their control over their learning process. Oxford (1994) argues that LLSs are not genetically built in; rather the learners can learn them. Oxford's (1990, 2001) has indicated that learning strategies paves the way for language learning. Further, strategy instruction encourages the learners to be involved in the language learning actively and manage their learning strategies (Anderson, 1991; Kinoshita, 2003). In relation to this, the present study intends to teach cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies to have learners read effectively.

Achievement results are affected by self-efficacy by engaging in cogitative process and applying cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). There is a paucity of research with respect to this domain; this study is conducted to investigate the impact of strategy training on self-efficacy, particularly in an Iranian EFL context.

This study is motivated by the following factors:

1. Little research on Iranian high school learners' cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies in relation to gender and language proficiency.

2. Little investigation on the effects of explicit strategy instruction on reading performance, self-efficacy, and transfer of strategies in an Iranian EFL context.

1.5. Objective of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore the general pattern of *cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies* of Iranian EFL learners, in particular the relationship between the use of *cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies* and other factors. In relation to this, the three main objectives of this study are as follows:

(i) To determine the cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies used by Iranian EFL learners.

(ii) To determine the relationship between the use of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies and particular factors.

(iii) To examine the impact of explicit teaching of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies on strategy use, reading performance, self-efficacy, and transfer of strategies, and attitude toward strategy training.

More specifically, this study hopes to address the following research questions:

Question 1: What kinds of the cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies used by Iranian EFL learners?

Question 2: Are there significant relationships among cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies and the gender and English proficiency of the students?

Question 3: what are the impacts of explicit instruction in cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies on students' strategy use, reading performance, self-efficacy, transfer of strategies, and attitude toward strategy training?

1.6. Significance of the Study

Much of the research on Iranian language education is centred on teaching reading through translation, using supporting materials and word-by-word explanations of meaning. The current study will follow a different direction in language learning and teaching, specifically that of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies.

However, little research is done on the use of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies of Iranian EFL learners or the relationship between these strategies and gender, English proficiency, and the impact of explicit teaching of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies on reading performance and self-efficacy in an Iranian EFL context. This study would be helpful to improve English language learning in Iran as currently, since most of the teaching and learning is based on teachers and teacher-centred. This study therefore

intends to address this research gap by focusing on the cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies with the purpose of having learner read English texts more effectively. This study also intends to contribute to domain of language learning strategies, particularly in the Iranian context.

1.7. Definition of Key Terms

<u>EFL</u> - English as a foreign language. English is not taught as a medium of instruction in education.

<u>Language learning strategies</u> – Certain activities that learner do to learn more effectively and transfer them to other contexts.

<u>Cognitive reading strategies</u> – Controlling processing of L2 information.

<u>Metacognitive reading strategies</u> – Managing of L2 learning process.

<u>Self-efficacy</u> – It is a person's attitude about his or her ability to do activities.

<u>L2 reading</u> **–** A cognitive process, active engagement in the construction of meaning, and use of strategies.

1.8. Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations that need to be addressed, namely choosing one geographical area, West Azerbaijan province, Iran, choosing only high school learners, not using facial gestures in think-aloud data, not using time distance in think-aloud analysis.

1.9. Conclusion and Overview of Forthcoming Chapters

In this chapter, the researcher presented the statement of the problem, objectives, research questions and significance of the study, and definition of key terms.

Chapter 2 is a review of research conducted on cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies, their relationship with different factors, reading strategy training research, transfer of strategies and self-efficacy. Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive description of the procedures of the three research questions. For each question, the participants, instruments and data analysis procedure are discussed. Chapter 4 presents the results of the Reading Strategy Questionnaire. Chapter 5 shows the results of the think–aloud protocols. Chapter 6 indicates the results of strategy instruction. Finally Chapter 7 presents the discussion and conclusions of the study.