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*Original Research Article*

# On the relationship between self-compassion and language learning strategy use

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**Abstract**

**The present study investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-compassion and language learning strategy use. A sample of 104 B.A and M.A level Iranian EFL learners majoring in English (both male and female) participated in this study. Three instruments, Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP), self-compassion scale, and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) were used for data collection. Multiple Regression analysis revealed that meta-cognitive strategies are significant predictors of 'self-kindness' and affective and compensation strategies are significant predictors of 'awareness of common humanity' and 'mindfulness'. Social strategies were also found to be negative predictors of 'self-judgment'. The findings of the present study suggest that the concept of self-compassion can provide instructors and authorities with useful insights into learner differences and their different needs in language learning.**

**Key words:** Language learning strategies, self-compassion, strategy use

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, many researchers have concentrated on the way in which people can learn a foreign language more efficiently. Also, presenting less successful learners with strategic ways to overcome learning difficulties has become very important for researchers. So, concentration on and interest in EFL has shifted from teachers and teaching to learners and learning. According to oxford (1992), it is very important that teachers be aware of variables such as gender, age, motivation, self-confidence, anxiety, language learning styles and strategies and many other factors which are different in various learners. Self-compassion, which is a new concept in psychology, was recently proposed by Neff (2003a) as one of the learner-specific variables. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between EFL students' self-compassion and language learning strategy use. It aims at finding answers to the following questions:

1. Which of the language learning strategies is a better predictor of self-kindness?
2. Which of the language learning strategies is a better predictor of self-judgment?
3. Which of the language learning strategies is a better predictor of common humanity?
4. Which of the language learning strategies is a better predictor of mindfulness?
5. Which of the language learning strategies is a better predictor of isolation?
6. Which of the language learning strategies is a better predictor of over-identification?

### Literature review

### Language learning strategies

Since late 1970s, language learning strategies have received great attention because concentration has shifted from teachers and teaching to learners and learning. Rubin (1987) defines language learning strategies as steps, behaviors, and techniques used by language learners to facilitate language learning. Language learning strategies are also defined by Oxford and Crookall (1989) as "steps taken by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information" (p.404). Oxford (1990) defines language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by language learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations"(p.8).

Since learners are different, they choose different strategies depending on their understanding of which strategies can possibly contribute to their learning (Cotterall, 2000). So, awareness of these variables is necessary for teachers to teach successfully.

Many researchers have attempted to examine how learner-specific variables such as age, gender, language proficiency, motivation, anxiety, aptitude, cultural background, beliefs about language learning, self-rated language proficiency, and learning styles can influence the use of language learning strategies (Chamot and El-Dinary, 1999; Green and Oxford, 1995; Erman and Oxford, 1989; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Politzer, 1983).

The relationship of most of these variables and the use of language learning strategies are discussed below.

In their investigation into language learning strategy use of 55 ESL students with different cultural and linguistic background, Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) concluded that although there was no significant difference in overall strategy use between female and male participants, a statistically significant difference was found in affective strategy use between males and females. Females highly used affective strategies. They found that meta-cognitive and compensation strategies were most frequently used by the male participants, who favoured affective strategies the least. Female participants tended to use meta-cognitive and social strategies most, and memory strategies least.

Moreover, Park (1997) investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and L2 proficiency of Korean university students. He reported a positive linear relationship between language learning strategies and L2 proficiency. The findings revealed a significant correlation between all six categories of strategies measured by Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and the participants' TOEFL scores.

Zarei and Elekaei (2013) studied the effect of motivation on Iranian students' choice of language learning strategies. The results showed that the level of motivation significantly influenced students' choice of memory, compensation and affective strategies. However, no significant effect was found on the choice of cognitive, meta-cognitive and social strategies.

## Self-compassion

Self-compassion, derived from Buddhist psychology, is a new concept in psychology which was recently proposed by Neff (2003a). Since it is a new construct, research on self-compassion is in its infancy.

According to Neff, Hsieh, and Dejitterat (2005), the definition of self-compassion is related to the general definition of compassion itself. They maintain that at the time of feeling compassion for others, individuals let themselves be touched by others' suffering experience. So, spontaneously the feeling of kindness and caring for the person's well-being arise. When it happens, in fact, an open-minded and non-judgmental attitude is taken toward those who have made a mistake or performed a misdeed.

In the same vein, Neff (2003b) defines self-compassion as offering kindness and being understanding towards oneself in pain or failure instead of being harshly self-critical. Instead of considering one's experiences as an individual, these experiences are perceived as part of the larger human experience. Also, self-compassion involves mindfulness (Brown and Ryan, 2003; Hayes et al., 1999) because of holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003b).

Neff (2003b) conceptualized self-compassion as involving self-kindness, mindfulness, awareness of common humanity, self judgment, isolation, and over-identification. She holds that self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity are the three basic components of self compassion. Although these are conceptually distinct, they interact to mutually enhance one another (Neff, 2003b).

It is necessary to make clear some misconceptions about self-compassion (Neff, 2004). Firstly, self-compassion is not the same as self-indulgence. Neff (2003a), in his interviews with people, found out that most people were a lot harder on themselves than on others and, when they were asked to talk about the reason, they said they were fearful about getting self-indulgent by being too kind to themselves. In fact, they believed that they would be a better person by beating themselves up emotionally. Horney (1950) asserts that by criticizing ourselves, we are not eager to have a good view of ourselves, and we do not want to change because of the fear of the consequences. And when we recognize our shortcomings, we will hit ourselves with an emotional hammer. Self-compassion, in contrast, should provide emotional safety, which is needed to see ourselves obviously. Therefore, we are able to recognize areas of change and growth (Neff, 2004).

In addition, Goldstein and Kornfield (1987) argue that self-compassion is completely different from self-pity. In feeling pity for others, individuals typically consider themselves as separate and disconnected from others. However, in the case of compassion, there is a feeling of connection to others, and people know that suffering is something common in all human beings. In the same vein, when feeling self-pity, individuals ignore their interconnections with others and feel that they are the only ones who are suffering. On the other hand, self-compassion allows individuals to know that they are not the only ones who experience pain and suffering.

Several studies have investigated different aspects of self-compassion. Iskender (2009) studied the relationship between self compassion, self efficacy, and control belief

about learning in Turkish university students. 390 students were asked to complete a questionnaire package of self-compassion scale, self efficacy scale, and control belief for learning scale. As one of the results of this study, he concluded that there were no significant gender differences in self-compassion, self efficacy, and control belief in learning. Using correlation analysis, he found that self-kindness is positively correlated with self efficacy and control belief, and self judgment is negatively correlated with self efficacy. Although awareness of common humanity was positively correlated with self efficacy and control belief, it had a negative correlation with self judgment. On the other hand, there was a negative association between isolation and self-efficacy and self-kindness, but isolation was positively associated with self-judgment. Mindfulness was related positively to self-efficacy, and control belief for learning, while it was negatively related to self-judgment and isolation. Finally, it was found that over identification had a negative correlation with self-efficacy and self-kindness, but a positive correlation with self-judgment and isolation.

Werner, et al. (2012) investigated the relationship between self-compassion and social anxiety disorder. They found that, in comparison to healthy control (HC), people with Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) reported less self-compassion in self-compassion scales and its subscales. Less self-compassion in the SAD group was not associated with severity of social anxiety. In fact, it was associated with negative and positive evaluation. On the other hand, there was a positive correlation between age and self-compassion in the HC group, while age was negatively correlated with self-compassion in the SAD group.

Neff, Rude, and Kirpatrick (2007) investigated the relationship between self-compassion, positive psychological health, and the five factor model of personality. 177 undergraduate males and females participated in this study. The results revealed that self-compassion was positively associated with self-reported measures of happiness, optimism, positive effect, wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity and exploration, agreeableness, extroversion, and conscientiousness. In addition, self-compassion was negatively associated with negative affect and neuroticism.

Neff, Hsieh, and Dejiterat (2005), in two studies, examined the relationship between self-compassion, academic achievement, and coping with perceived academic failure among undergraduates. The first study revealed that self-compassion had positive relationship with mastery goals, while it had a negative relationship with performance goals. The second study confirmed the results of the first study, with results indicating a negative relationship between self-compassion and avoidance-oriented strategies, and a positive relationship between self-compassion and emotion-focused coping strategies.

Previous research has shown a significantly positive relationship between self-compassion and mental health benefits (Neff, 2004). Studies have also suggested that less depression and anxiety lead to greater life satisfaction (Neff, 2003a).

Self-compassion can be a predictor of emotional and cognitive reactions to negative events in everyday life. It protects people against negative self-feelings when imagining worrying social events. It moderates negative emotions after receiving both good and bad feedback, particularly for participants who have low self-esteem. Finally, self-compassion leads people to admit their role in negative events without feeling overwhelmed with negative emotions (Leary et al., 2007).

Akin (2012) studied the relationship between self-compassion and automatic thought. 299 university students participated in this study and responded to Automatic thought and self-compassion questionnaires. Correlation analysis showed that self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness components of self-compassion negatively correlated with automatic thoughts, while self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification factors of self-compassion positively correlated with automatic thoughts. Meanwhile, Path Analysis showed that automatic thoughts were negatively associated with self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, although self-judgment and over-identification positively predicted automatic thought. But the path from isolation to automatic thoughts was not significant.

In short, although many studies have been done on the relationship between self-compassion and different variables, few studies have been concerned with the relationship between students' strategy use and self-compassion. Therefore, there appears to be a gap here. In an attempt to partially fill this gap, this study investigates Iranian students' self-compassion and language learning strategy use.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants of the present study initially included a sample of 120 B.A and M.A Iranian EFL students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and English Translation (both males and females) at Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch; Imam Khomeini International University; and Kar University, in Qazvin, iran. The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) was administered to homogenize the participants in terms of their English language proficiency level. As a result, the number of participants was reduced to 104. Ten students were excluded from the study because they had a different level of proficiency. Six other students were excluded because they did not complete the questionnaires.

**Table 1.** Model Summaryb

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .212[a] | .045 | .036 | 3.858 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), meta-cognitive
b. Dependent Variable: self-kindness

**Table 2.** Coefficients of language learning strategies

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | T | Sig. |
| 1 | (Constant) | 8.668 | 1.557 | | 5.567 | .000 |
| | Meta-cognitive | .122 | .056 | .212 | 2.193 | .031 |

a. Dependent Variable: self-kindness

## Instruments

### Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency

The test is a three-part multiple choice test. It measures learners' grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. This test, which is a reliable one, consists of 40 items on grammar in conversational format, 40 items on vocabulary asking for synonyms or sentence completion, and 20 items on reading comprehension. This test was used to homogenize the participants in terms of their level of English language proficiency.

### Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, ESL/EFL 0.7 version)

It is a six-part 5-point Likert scale self-report questionnaire consisting of 50 strategy items (from "never" to "always"). The questionnaire contains memory strategies (9 items), cognitive strategies (14 items), compensation strategies (6 items), meta-cognitive strategies (9 items), affective strategies (6 items), and social strategies (6 items).

### Self-compassion scale developed by Neff (2003)

The self-compassion scale is a 26-item self-report inventory and consists of six subscales; self kindness (5 items), self-judgment (5 items), awareness of common humanity (4 items), isolation (4 items), mindfulness (4 items), and over-identification (4 items). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

### Procedure

The following procedure was followed to achieve the purpose of the present study.

First, 120 B.A and M.A Iranian EFL students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and English Translation (both males and females) at Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch; Imam Khomeini International University; and Kar University in Qazvin, Iran were selected to participate in the study. To remove possible anxiety, all the participants were informed about the purpose of the study.

Then, to make sure that there were no significant differences among the participants in terms of their proficiency level, the general proficiency test (MTELP) was administered. To homogenize the participants, their scores on MTELP were summarized, and the mean and standard deviation were computed. The scores of those who scored between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected, and the others were excluded from all subsequent analyses. The participants had 60 minutes to answer the proficiency test. At this stage, no questions were answered.

Finally, the strategies and self-compassion questionnaires were given to all the participants. The participants had 45 minutes to complete these two questionnaires. The participants' questions about the items were answered.

### Data analysis

To analyze the obtained data and to answer the research questions, 6 different multiple regression analyses were used.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Investigation of the first research question

The first research question investigated types of language learning strategies as predictors of self-kindness. To this end, a multiple regression procedure was used. Table 1 show that only meta-cognitive

**Table 3.** Model Summary b

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .197[a] | .039 | .029 | 12.368 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), social
b. Dependent Variable: self-judgment

**Table 4.** Coefficients of language learning strategies

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
| 1 | (Constant) | 19.813 | 4.289 | | 4.620 | .000 |
| | social | -.345 | .170 | -.197 | -2.030 | .045 |

a. Dependent Variable: self-judgment

strategies entered into the regression equation. The other types of language learning strategies did not contribute to the regression model. Based on model summary (Table 1), it can be seen that meta-cognitive strategies and self-kindness share 3.6% of the variance. In other words, meta-cognitive strategies explain 3.6% of the total variance in self-kindness.

The standardized coefficient and the significance of the observed t-value for the predictor were checked to find out how strong the relationship between self-kindness and the predictor is. Table 2 shows the results.

Based on Table 2, meta-cognitive strategies account for a statistically significant portion of the variance in self-kindness. Meta-cognitive strategies are the onlypredictors of motivation; for every one standard deviation change in meta-cognitive strategies scores, there will be .21 of a standard deviation change in self-kindness scores.

## Investigation of the second research question

The second research question investigated types of language learning strategies as predictors of self-judgment. To this end, another multiple regression procedure was used. Table 3 shows that only social strategies entered into the regression equation. The other types of language learning strategies did not contribute to the regression model. Based on model summary (Table 3), social strategies and self-judgment share 2.9% of the variance. In other words, social strategies explain 2.9% of the total variance in self-judgment.

The standardized coefficient and the significance of the observed t-value for the predictor were checked to find out how strong the relationship between self-judgment and the predictor is. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4 shows that social strategies account for a statistically significant portion of the variance in self-judgment. For every one standard deviation increase in social strategies scores, there will be .19 of a standard deviation decrease in self-judgment. This means that social strategies are negative predictors of self-judgment.

## Investigation of the third research question

The third research question tried to investigate which types of language learning strategies are better predictors of common humanity. To this end, a multiple regression procedure was used. Table 5 shows that affective and compensation strategies entered into the regression equation. Based on model summary (Table 5), affective strategies and common humanity share 14% of the variance. Affective and compensation strategies together share 20% of the variance with common humanity. In other words, affective and compensation strategies collectively explain 20% of the total variance in common humanity.

The standardized coefficient and the significance of the observed t-value for the predictors were checked to find out how strong the relationship between common humanity and the predictors is. Table 6 shows the results. Table 6 shows that affective and compensation strategies account for a statistically significant portion of the variance in common humanity. Affective strategies are the best predictor of common humanity; for every one standard deviation change in affective strategies scores, there will be .39 of a standard deviation change in common humanity. Compensation strategies are another predictor of common humanity; every one standard deviation increase in the compensation strategies scores, there will be .27 of a standard deviation increase in common humanity.

## Investigation of the fourth research question

The aim of the fourth research question was to investi-

**Table 5.** Model Summary c

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .392[a] | .154 | .145 | 2.740 |
| 2 | .474[b] | .225 | .209 | 3.635 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), affective
b. Predictors: (Constant), affective, compensation
c. Dependent Variable: common humanity

**Table 6.** Coefficients a

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
| 1 | (Constant) | 6.416 | .740 | | 8.666 | .000 |
| | Affective | .154 | .036 | .392 | 4.304 | .000 |
| 2 | (Constant) | 3.876 | 1.097 | | 3.534 | .001 |
| | Affective | .139 | .035 | .353 | 3.983 | .000 |
| | compensation | .127 | .042 | .270 | 3.045 | .003 |

a. Dependent Variable: common humanity

**Table 7.** Model Summary c

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .290[a] | .084 | .075 | 3.100 |
| 2 | .363[b] | .132 | .115 | 3.032 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), compensation
b. Predictors: (Constant), compensation, affective
c. Dependent Variable: mindfulness

**Table 8.** Coefficients a

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
| 1 | (Constant) | 6.173 | .1.127 | | 5.480 | .000 |
| | Compensation | .149 | .049 | .290 | 3.058 | .003 |
| 2 | (Constant) | 4.717 | 1.262 | | 3.738 | .000 |
| | Compensation | .132 | .048 | .258 | 2.748 | .007 |
| | Affective | .095 | .040 | .222 | 2.365 | .020 |

a. Dependent Variable: mindfulness

gate which types of language learning strategies are better predictors of mindfulness. To this end, a stepwise multiple regressions were run. Table 7 shows that compensation and affective strategies entered into the regression. Based on the model summary (Table 7), based on the model summary (Table 7), it can be seen that compensation strategies and mindfulness share 7% of the variance. Compensation and Affective strategies together share 11% of the variance with mindfulness. In other words, affective and compensation strategies collectively explain 11% of the total variance in mindfulness.

To see the strength of the relationship between mindfulness and the predictors, the standardized coefficients and the significance of the observed t-values for each predictor were checked.

Based on Table 8, compensation and affective strategies account for a statistically significant portion of the variance in mindfulness. Compensation strategies are the best predictor of mindfulness; for every one standard deviation change in compensation strategies scores, there will be .29 of a standard deviation change in mindfulness. Affective strategies are another predictor of mindfulness; every one standard deviation increase in affective strategies scores, there will be .22 of a standard deviation increase in mindfulness.

### Investigation of the fifth research question

The fifth research question sought to investigate which types of language learning strategies are better predictors of isolation. To answer this question, another multiple regression procedure was used. No variables entered into the regression equation. Therefore, it was concluded that there are no significant differences in the predictive power of language learning strategies on isolation.

### Investigation of the sixth research question

The sixth research question sought to investigate types of language learning strategies as predictors of over-identification. To answer this question, another multiple regression procedure was used. Again, no variables entered into the regression equation. Therefore, it was concluded that there are no significant differences in the predictive power of language learning strategies on over-identification.

## DISCUSSION

One of the findings of the present study was that affective and compensation strategies were better predictors of awareness of common humanity and mindfulness, while meta-cognitive strategies were better predictors of self-kindness. The participants used more affective and compensation strategies for common humanity and mindfulness in comparison to other categories of language learning strategies and more meta-cognitive strategies for self-kindness. Since no investigation can be found about the relationship between language learning strategies and self-compassion, one has to resort to indirect implications from related studies. Iskender (2009), in his investigation into the relationship between self-compassion, self-efficacy, and control belief about learning in Turkish university students, found a positive relationship between self-kindness, mindfulness, common humanity, and control belief. In addition, Yang (1999) studied the relationship between EFL learners' beliefs and learning strategy use. He found a cyclical relationship between learners' beliefs and language learning strategies. Based on these relationships and associations, it can be concluded that there must be relationships between self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, and language learning strategies. Further implications can be inferred from Cottrall's (1995) investigation on learners' autonomy and beliefs and Neff's (2003a) study on self-compassion and autonomy. Cottrall (1995) examined how learners' beliefs about language learning reflect their readiness for autonomy. Meanwhile, Neff (2003a) found that self-kindness, mindfulness, and awareness of common humanity are associated with feelings of autonomy and competence. Based on these studies, it can be inferred that there is a relationship between beliefs about language learning and self-kindness, awareness of common humanity, and mindfulness. According to Yang's (1999) findings about the relationship between beliefs about language learning and language learning strategies, it is possible to infer that there must also be relationship between self-kindness, awareness of common humanity, mindfulness, and language learning strategies.

The present study also suggests that social strategies are negative predictors of self-judgment. Yong (1999) in his study on the relationship between language learning strategies and beliefs about language learning found that self-efficacy and expectations about learning English were closely related to the use of all the six categories of learning strategies. Since, Iskender (2009) found a negative correlation between self-judgment and self-efficacy, it can be concluded that there must be a negative correlation between language learning strategies and self-judgment. From this perspective, the findings of Yong (1999) and Iskender (2009) corroborate the findings of this study.

Finally, based on the results of this study, none of the language learning strategies were predictors of isolation. However, Iskender (2009) found a negative relation between isolation and self-efficacy, and Yang (1999) reported a close relationship between language learning strategies and self-efficacy. Accordingly, there can be a relationship between language learning strategies and isolation. So, these findings are in contrast with those of the present study.

A number of factors could possibly account for these findings. The cultural differences might be one reason for the differences between the results of the present study and those of the above studies. Politzer and McGorarty (1985) and Chamot (2004) confirm the effect of culture on the choice of language learning strategies.

The differences in the learners' level of proficiency might also have affected their language learning strategy use. In this study, the participants were at upper-intermediate level. As a result, they may have been able to use indirect strategies such as meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies and direct strategies such as cognitive and compensation strategies. Park (1997) and Yang (2007) have emphasized the role of level of proficiency in the choice of language learning strategies.

Gender differences may also be considered as another factor contributing to such differences in the findings. Gender differences were not taken into consideration in the present study although they might have affected the learning strategy use and choice. Green and Oxford (1995), Zare (2010), Radwan (2011), and Sheorey (1999) emphasize the prominent role of gender differences in the choice of language learning strategies.

The age of the participant might be another factor

contributing to such findings. In the present study, the age of the participants was not taken into consideration. Some researchers have investigated the use of strategies by young or adult learners and reached different conclusions regarding whether younger learners adopt different sets of strategies in comparison to older learners (Chamot and El-Dinary ,1999; Wharton, 2000).

## CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to investigate types of language learning strategies as predictors of self-compassion. The results showed that meta-cognitive strategies are significant predictors of "self-kindness" and affective and compensation strategies are significant predictors of "awareness of common humanity" and "mindfulness". It was also found that social strategies are negative predictors of "self-judgment". The study suggests that the concept of self-compassion can provide useful information for instructors and authorities to know learners' differences and their different needs in language learning. The findings of the present study may also be beneficial for materials developers and syllabus designers. They can use the findings to develop materials and course books to improve the types of language learning strategies which are directly related to self-compassion.

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