

Language Learning Strategies Used by ESL Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

English is considered a second language (ESL) in Malaysia and is one of the prerequisite subjects at private universities. Students are able to identify the strategies yet still some struggle in learning the language. In order to master a language, students must be able to develop their own language learning techniques. The goal of this research is to find out more about the language learning strategies (LLS) used by students of a private university in Selangor. It involved 200 freshmen from five different faculties at a university. This quantitative survey used a questionnaire adapted from Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990) as the instrument. Descriptive statistics were administered to investigate the usage of LLS among the respondents. The findings showed that respondents tend to use their preferred LLS in improving their language skills. It is hoped that language educators would use the findings to focus their attention on facilitating English language learning programs that are appropriate for students' LLS, thus assisting them in developing their English language skills.

Keywords

English as Second Language (ESL), Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Private University

1. Introduction

Learning a language is a complex process that takes longer than anticipated. Language learning is described as the process through which an individual's language capacity improves. Learning a language requires strategies, processes, and routines (Hashim & Hashim, 2018). Not only English is the language of international commerce, it is also the language of technology, which helps countries to be more competitive, particularly in an era of borderless worlds that fos-

ters a more permissive environment for the exchange of goods and services (Abdul Rahman & Boon, 2006; Yahaya et al., 2009). In the field of education, a student must grasp the English language to comprehend reading resources written in English, which are more abundant and readily accessible. English has served as a bridge between people across the globe, allowing them to access a large variety of high-quality academic learning resources and instructional materials that are readily accessible online. Most references are published in English, which require proficiency as well as a good level of language comprehension, in addition to the students' ability to master the information seeking technique itself.

The study of language learning strategies (LLS), particularly the study of English as a second language (ESL), has become one of the most significant subjects in the study of students' language acquisition (McDonough, 1995). There are many different methods to learn a language. Students are provided liberty and the ability to become self-sufficient in their language learning process (Ali, Zaman, & Khan, 2018). One of the forefathers within the studies on LLS, Rubin assumed that there is the use of certain strategies that may allow differentiating successful and unsuccessful students in one's language learning (as cited in Rubin & Wenden, 1987). Studies on LLS are then further discussed and developed more widely and comprehensively by Oxford (1990). Current learning trends in second language acquisition (SLA) enable students to experiment with and choose learning strategies that work best for them (Rubaai & Hashim, 2019).

LLS are an important area to enhance students' English learning abilities. Since most studies looked at understanding students' choosing their preferred strategies from the six learning strategies according to age, gender, socioeconomic status (e.g. Magno, 2010; Liyanage & Bartlett, 2012; Chen, 2014; Koç, 2017; Mahalingam & Md Yunus, 2017; Likitrattanaporn, 2018; Adan & Hashim, 2021), there is an obvious gap within understanding students at higher education, particularly within the private universities. Therefore, this study aims to investigate private university students' preference in the usage of LLS in order to enhance their English language.

2. Literature Review

English is said to be a lingua franca since it is widely spoken around the globe. According to Bayuon, Hashim and Yunus (2019), English serves as a first language for a small number of people and has developed into the language of teaching and educational modules in several countries. Additionally, English is used as a second language in nations such as Malaysia, Singapore, India, and the Netherlands (Bayuon, Hashim, & Yunus, 2019) (cited as Bayuon, 2019). However, English language plays a vital role as one of the fundamental subjects at primary level as well as medium of instructional language (Chiew & Ismail, 2021). According to Lukas and Yunus et al. (2021) cited as Yunus 2021, ESL learning has never been easy, much more so for remedial students who need educators to screen and coach them throughout the lesson. The ability to com-

municate in English language helps individuals to be able to explore more knowledge around the world and use it in a proper context.

Learning strategies are special methods for solving a problem or a task, designing a desired outcome, manipulating and controlling information obtained towards the interest of learning (Wegner, Minnaert, & Strehlke, 2013). Students are required to take advantage of a good strategy in order to master the field of language. Strategy is also defined as plans, designs and systematic procedures which are normally used during the teaching and learning process.

2.1. Language Learning Strategies

A student needs to identify their respective learning strategies to have a good effect on the learning that is followed. According to Biekey and Rodman (as cited in Abdul Karim et al. (2003), the process of learning is important for students to know the types of learning strategies that suit themselves. This is because the learning strategy practiced will influence their achievement. Oxford (1990) identified LLS as actions, behaviours, steps and techniques which are specifically taken by the students consciously, to enhance understanding in targeted language learning.

Some of the issues that arise within the existing research are the identification of procedures in using LLS, classifications of strategies and the effects of learners' characteristics, culture and context on the learning strategy itself namely, gender, learners' autonomy and the ability of the learners in general (Rubin, 2010; Mistar & Umamah, 2014; Alfian, 2016). As for Embi (2000) cited as Mohamad Amin Embi (2000), he argued that successful language learners are those who use a variety of strategies in learning the language. Meanwhile, Oxford (1990) highlighted some importance in strategy learning. Among them, learning strategies enable students to motivate themselves to be more self-directed in learning because they are able to learn without being instructed by the teacher. The knowledge of LLS can significantly contribute to the enhancement of the teaching and learning process (Sani & Ismail, 2021).

Understanding and identifying strategies bring learners to an understanding that LLS itself can be grouped into several parts namely, formal practice of the language related to grammar and syntax, use of language for purposive communication and drawing conclusions on guesses of the unknown meaning (Cohen, Oxford, & Chi, 2002).

2.2. Taxonomy of Language Learning Strategies

According to O'Malley et al. (as cited in Mitits, 2015), strategy is divided into three types which are cognitive, metacognitive and socio affective. Information processed with translation, making notes and repetition is achieved with direct connection to cognitive strategy. Metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring and self-evaluation assist in the implementation of the learning. Collaborating and clarification are examples of socio affective strategies that connect with others during the learning process. This discovery confirms that the role of cognitive and me-

metacognitive strategies have a relationship that is closely related to language learning. Some of these strategies also identify socio-affective strategies that help learners reduce the anxiety of learning the language.

Oxford (1990) divided LLS into two large divisions which are direct and indirect strategies. This taxonomy emerged as a result of research to offer alternatives towards the emphasis given on cognitive and metacognitive strategies and the neglect of socio affective strategy. Direct strategy is a strategy that relates to how students handle targeted language learning which includes the involvement of mental processes about the language learned. Indirect strategy involves learning as a whole and more generally.

2.2.1. Direct Strategy

Direct strategies include memory strategy, cognitive strategy and compensation strategy (Oxford, 1990). Memory strategies are techniques used to recall, retrieve information and transfer them from facts to appropriate skill level to be used. It is done by making mental connections by using images or sounds and use of actions or physical movements to facilitate memory. Cognitive learning strategies are related to how students think about their learning process. This includes such as practicing, receiving and sending messages and making assumptions. The students also create structures for inputs and outputs that enable them to learn a new language in many more practical ways. Compensation strategy refers to behaviours that use new language to replace information or words as a result of lack of appropriate vocabulary. Through this learning strategy, students with limited language knowledge and vocabulary will try to learn to guess wisely in overcoming constraints in conversation and writing.

2.2.2. Indirect Strategy

Indirect strategies include metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy (Oxford, 1990). Metacognitive strategy relates to how students govern and control their learning. Students seek information on language acquisition, arranging their studies, setting goals and learning objectives, and defining activities such as listening, reading, conversing, or writing throughout the organization and plan the learning phase. Affective strategy refers to the feelings and emotions students relate to learning. This strategy is also related to lowering the level of anxiety by self-stimulation, taking note of emotional levels, motivations and attitudes toward learning the targeted language. Social learning strategies include activities that involve others such as asking questions, working with others, sympathy towards others as in creating cultural understanding, understanding the mind and people's feelings. This strategy always encourages interaction with others for assistance in language acquisition.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Since the use of qualitative research design enables the explanation of factor

trends, an evaluation of selected samples and representation of large populations (Cresswell, 2012), this study was conducted to identify research problems based on language learning strategies in private universities. Quantitative analysis is suitable because the population is a non-governmental university in Selangor which has a big number of respondents. A total of 200 undergraduates from five faculties were involved in this study as the sample.

3.2. Research Instrument

Data was collected using the SILL questionnaire. Questionnaires are survey techniques used to design market research to understand consumer preferences and interests (Fowler, 2014). Moreover, the questionnaire is most appropriate when the sample is large and widely distributed. All information was obtained using the SILL questionnaire administered by the researcher with reference to previous research. Questionnaires make an effective method to use to obtain information from respondents because both researchers and respondents have no personal relationship (Mathers, Fox, & Hunn, 2007). The questionnaire was carefully administered to elicit feedback from the respondents.

For a practical means of distribution, the questionnaires were constructed using the Google Form. The research instrument is divided into seven parts: (Part A) background information and (Parts B, C, D, E, F, G) language learning strategies. Part A is designed to obtain sample demographic data such as gender, age and faculty. In parts B, C, D, E, F and G are statements that are divided according to the language learning strategies. There are a total of 50 statements or items that examine the six learning strategies namely memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy. Scores for each item were determined by sample responses in a 3-point Likert scale; namely “Never”, “Sometimes” and “Always”.

3.3. Participants

A total of 200 freshmen undergraduates from a private university in Selangor responded in the questionnaire. The undergraduates were chosen from the five faculties of the private university namely, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences (FHLS), Faculty of Business Management and Professional Studies (FBMP), School of Education and Social Sciences (SESS), Faculty of Information Sciences and Engineering (FISE) and Hospitality and Creative Arts (SHCA). The samples for this study were selected using Krejcie and Morgan random sampling method that took into account the students' availability. The samples consist of 119 (59.5%) female students whereas 81 (40.5%) male students. Besides that, the highest number of respondents comes from the group of 18 - 23 years of age, which is 159 respondents (79.5%). The samples are also made up of undergraduate students from five faculties where 50 respondents (25%) are from the Faculty of Education while there are 46 respondents (23%) from each FHLS and FBMP. The least response came from SHCA with only 24 respondents that only accu-

mulated 12% of the respondents.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

In order to analyze the collected data, descriptive analysis was conducted to describe the type of language learning strategy preferred by the students. Data were collected and processed using SPSS V23.0 software. All questionnaires collected were numbered as random respondent labels and data was entered into the software for the analysis process. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze mean, median, mode, standard deviation, frequency and percentage of each of the items in the survey and to find the most and least preferred strategy among the 200 freshmen.

4. Findings and Discussion

Findings from the 200 freshmen undergraduates of a private university show that there are more female students than their male counterparts. 119 respondents or 59.5% of them are female students whereas 81 respondents or 40.5% are male students. Moreover, the highest number of respondents comes from 18 - 23 years of age with 159 respondents or 79.5%. This shows that respondents are freshmen undergraduate students at the university. Since the instrument was given to five faculties members, it was found that 50 respondents or 25% are from the education faculty. FHLS and FBMP faculty each have 46 respondents or 23% from the total respondents. The least response came from SHCA with only 24 respondents that only accumulated 12% of the respondents.

Table 1 explains the mean and standard deviation value of 10% of the most frequently used items or statements according to the strategies by the respondents.

The most frequently used item was Item 32 (students pay attention when someone is speaking English) with mean 2.67 and sd 0.532. This was followed by Item 31 (“I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better”) with a mean value of 2.59, followed by Item 15 where students watch English programmes or movies in TV (mean = 2.58 and sd = 0.605), Item 38 “I think about my progress in learning English” (mean = 2.57 and sd = 0.606) and Item 49 where students asked questions in English with a mean value of 2.54. A

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of 10% most frequently used strategies (N = 200).

Item No	Strategy	Mean	Standard Deviation	Strategy Category	Interpretation
32	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	2.67	0.532	Metacognitive	High
31	I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	2.59	0.569	Metacognitive	High
15	I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	2.58	0.605	Cognitive	High
38	I think about my progress in learning English.	2.57	0.606	Metacognitive	High
49	I ask questions in English.	2.54	0.519	Social	High

total of three metacognitive strategies, one cognitive strategy and one social strategy were at a high level of use by the respondents.

Based on **Table 1**, it shows that the undergraduate students in a private university look forward to learning the English language as well as getting to know its use through listening and communication. Their eagerness to learn the language is shown through several indications including the level of attention given when someone speaks in English, noticing mistakes noticed and recorrecting as part of improving the English language as well as the ability to adapt to the corrected mistakes and learn to use it in a proper context. Since the respondents are undergraduates, more questions are asked in order to rectify their doubts on language. Not only that, a mixture of different races within the learning environment gives the students more confidence in using and learning the English language for communication purposes. Therefore, students are more organized in learning the English language.

Table 2 below explains the mean and standard deviation value of 10% of the least used items or statements according to the strategies by the respondents.

The least used statement or item by the respondents is Item 6 which states that students use flashcards to memorize a new word (mean = 1.65 and sd = 0.714). It is then followed by Item 43 (“I write down my feelings in a language learning diary”) with a mean value of 1.84. Both Item 15 (students use rhymes to remember a new word) and Item 44 (students talk to someone else about their feelings towards learning English), received the same mean value of 1.92. Lastly, Item 26 (“I make up new words if I don’t know the right ones in English”) has a mean value of 1.93 with sd = 0.726.

The findings from **Table 2** unfolds that these respondents of undergraduates are adult learners and not children. It is impossible for them to memorize new words using flashcards and rhymes at this age. The respondents would have felt childish using those materials to memorize new words since they are more technology savvy. Moreover, in this new globalization era where digitalization has taken place, respondents lack the ability to use diaries to write out their memories or feelings. Students tend to share their feelings or memories more on social media by writing less and more to picturization. Nowadays, it has become a norm where English words are mixed up with other language words when it

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of 10% least used strategies (N = 200).

Item No	Strategy	Mean	Standard Deviation	Strategy Category	Interpretation
6	I use flashcards to remember new English words.	1.65	0.714	Memory	Low
43	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	1.84	0.760	Affective	Medium
15	I use rhymes to remember new English words.	1.92	0.746	Memory	Medium
44	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	1.92	0.785	Affective	Medium
26	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	1.93	0.726	Compensation	Medium

comes to communicating with one another of different races. New era students make up new words if they don't know the right one that needs to be used.

The result in **Table 3** shows the analysis of the six language learning strategies namely memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy.

It is found that respondents or students have used all the six language learning strategies with different frequencies. The mean value between strategies are in a range of 2.10 - 2.50. Among the six learning strategies that have been analyzed, it is found that the most preferred strategy used by the students is metacognitive strategy with mean value of 2.50, followed by social strategy (mean value = 2.40) followed by cognitive strategy with mean 2.34, compensation strategy with mean value of 2.17 and memory strategy with mean value of 2.13. The least preferred strategy by the students is affective strategy with a mean value of 2.08.

Metacognitive is an element that is closely related to the thinking process. It is a knowledge or awareness that enables a person to learn in depth about it (Brown, 2001) that the use of this strategy does not only nurture learning to a higher level but also helps to equip the students with knowledge and language skills while managing to control their thinking and learning activities. Based on the results obtained from the given SILL, it is found that most of the students selected items about paying attention while others are speaking, noticing English mistakes made and using that information to improve themselves and also thinking about their progress in learning English language. These items have the highest mean value compared to other items and also the number of students who agree to it. Through this result, it proves that students are attentive and interested when studying the language during lessons. By paying full attention to each learning input, it allows the students to improve their language proficiency. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) emphasized that a student without metacognitive strategy is a student who has no planning and direction to their progress. Inability to use this strategy will only allow students to be unfocused and less coordination skills in their learning process.

The least used strategy is effective strategy with a mean value of 2.08. Most of the students opted for the "sometimes" option for five out of six items in this strategy. Most of the students sometimes try to relax themselves whenever they feel afraid of using the language. Not only that, students too sometimes reward themselves when they do well in English. This shows that emotions and motivations do play a role in students' life to adapt or learn the English language. Some

Table 3. Statistical value of language learning strategies.

	Memory Strategy	Cognitive Strategy	Compensation Strategy	Metacognitive Strategy	Affective Strategy	Social Strategy
Mean	2.13	2.34	2.17	2.50	2.08	2.40
Standard Deviation	0.5896	0.5688	0.5820	0.5429	0.6642	0.6301

students' also notice their attitude changed when learning English (becoming more anxious).

As an overall, the respondents who are freshmen undergraduate ESL learners from a private local university used all the strategies in their language learning process. Metacognitive strategy and social strategy have high usage whereas the others namely; memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy and affective strategy have a medium usage among the respondents. There might be several factors that influenced the use of LLS in learning the English language. Among the factors that caused the overall level of the use of LLS to be moderate is the students' attitude towards the language. Students' attitude towards a language and its learning become determinants and integral in the selection of strategies that will be used in their learning (Kuntz, 1996; Hamid, 1994). MacIntyre and Noels (1996) cited as MacInyre (1996) are of the view that among the factors that result in more frequent use of LLS is students' seriousness in language learning. The examination oriented learning system in the education system in Malaysia also influences the usage level of LLS between the students. Students are more focused on getting excellent results or passing the exams; they are more likely to achieve their goals in exams thus neglecting the language construction aspect. Thus, this situation has affected the selection and the use of LLS among students.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study display that metacognitive strategy and social strategy are the most preferred language learning strategies and most often used by undergraduate students in a private university when learning and studying English language. This is followed by memory and affective strategies which are the least used strategies. Therefore, the LLS used by students are more to their own preference of learning style and method. Good students need to be observed and share their experiences along with weaker students to motivate them. Language educators need to expose their students to a variety of methods, and in order to do so, they must get familiar with the strategies and understand how to teach them to their students (Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021).

It is expected that the findings of this study can help students be more sensitive about the use of suitable language learning strategies in order to gain more knowledge in learning the English language. The use of appropriate language learning strategy is also possible in helping to run the learning process more effectively (Oxford, 1990). For future research, it is suggested that more research studies can be implemented by involving more student respondents from different universities and involving more variables such as gender factors, language background and level of learning. In addition, qualitative methods can also be used in this study to explore more in-depth views of the students in the process of learning English. The findings are meant to help language educators focus their efforts on facilitating English language learning tools that are suited for

students' language learning processes, thereby boosting them in strengthening their English language skills.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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