

Preferred Learning Strategies among Malaysian Primary ESL Learners

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Abstract

Language learning strategies are measures initiated and undertaken by students to optimize their language acquisition. Strategies are particularly significant because they provide instruments for engaged, self-directed participation, which is critical for establishing communicative competence. A great measure of accountability for their own learning progress is also nurtured through the employment of language learning strategies. This study aims to investigate the preferred learning strategies among Malaysian Primary ESL learners. The respondents were composed of 54 Level 2 Primary students in a Malaysian government school. To determine the Primary ESL learners' preferred learning strategies for reading skill, "Young Learners' Language Strategy Use Survey" was adapted. The score percentages were analyzed and the results reveal that the most preferred language learning strategies were affective strategies while cognitive strategy is less favored. The findings imply that language teachers therefore play an important role in introducing and familiarizing students to various reading strategies. Finally, new research possibilities and instructional applications are offered, opening the way for a more comprehensive knowledge of second language learning strategies and processes.

Keywords

Language Learning Strategies, Second Language Acquisition, Malaysian, Primary ESL Learners, Preferred Strategies

1. Introduction

English language is now widely utilized as a means of communication, frequently termed as a "lingua franca." The revolution of the digital age and globalization has rendered English language competency a need for global citizens to thrive

and survive in the 21st Century. According to Reddy and Mahavidyalaya (2016), there have been roughly 375 million native English speakers and 750 million people who speak English as a second language around the world. Kiew and Shah (2020) explain the importance of English is evident in many sectors, spanning from business to international relations to academia. It is essential to learn English in order to keep in pace with the demands of the expanding globalization era, as it is the medium through which knowledge is disseminated. This realization has prompted the Malaysian education system to put great emphasis in the teaching and learning of English. One of the key aspirations underlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) is to produce students with bilingual proficiency of Malay and English languages.

There has been a steady and growing interest in language learning strategies (LLS) over the past decades. Language learning strategies play a pivotal role in catalyzing the mastery of language acquisition. Amir (2018) posits that identifying appropriate language learning strategies can help students to learn and improve their language competence. Studies also proved that good language learners are high users of language learning strategies (Nazri, Yunus, & Mohamad Nazri, 2016). Kajan and Shah (2019) remark that motivation and attitude are two pivotal factors that must be possessed by every language learner to ensure their success in language acquisition. Although extensive academic research has explored language learning strategies (see Semtin & Maniam, 2015; Muniandy & Shuib, 2016; Ting & Lau, 2016; Yunus & Saifudin, 2019), however, very little research has investigated specific language skills. There is a gap in the literature on reading strategies among Malaysian Primary ESL learners. In the context of second language learning, reading strategies are pertinent to promote students' reading comprehension and provide them with a clear purpose in their reading process. Sani and Ismail (2021) report that young Malaysian learners use direct and indirect strategies in language learning thus indicating that these young learners can be trained to employ various strategies both for general and specific language skills.

This particular study on strategy use is concerned with the preferred reading strategies among Level 2 pupils at a Malaysian primary school. The goal was aimed towards identifying the most and the least preferred strategies. Knowledge and awareness of the strategies employed by the students could then be used to enhance their language learning. Additionally, the findings are also important to help teachers be sensitive to the individual needs in a classroom of students. The research questions driving this study are as follows:

RQ1: What is the most preferred Language Learning Strategy (LLS) used for reading skill among Level 2 primary pupils?

RQ2: What is the least Language Learning Strategy (LLS) used for reading skill among Level 2 primary pupils?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

For several decades, there have been a tremendous interest and on the field of

second language acquisition. It attracts to both experts and learners, as being deliberate about one's learning is always viewed favorably. A number of deductive and inductive theories of second language acquisition have been proposed. Stephen Krashen's theory of second language learning is one of the most influential and well-known. Krashen established the Monitor Model in the late 1970s, which is a "overall" theory of second language learning with significant implications for language education. The Monitor Model addresses the acquisition vs. learning hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the emotional filter hypothesis. Krashen's Monitor Theory is an exemplar of a macro theory that attempts to account for the majority of factors that impact second language learning, such as age, personality traits, classroom teaching, intrinsic language acquisition mechanisms, contextual effects, and input. Earlier than that, the Universal Grammar theory was proposed. Chomsky (2001) asserts that certain principles serve as the foundation for the development of language knowledge. The Universal Grammar was used to indicate the nature of developmental sequences in interlanguage and to support the idea of interlanguage as a natural language despite the constraints of the Universal Grammar. It was also suggested that Universal Grammar be used for language transfer, fossilization, and second language pedagogy. The second language acquisition theories describe the numerous aspects of second language acquisition process. While the theories are mutually exclusive, all of the however consider learning a second language as a gradual process. Language learners must advance towards the target language through many stages of growth, regardless of whether they use tactics, cognitive, or intrinsic mechanisms. In another words, theories of second language acquisition supports the roles strategies play in promoting language learning.

2.2. Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

Many scholars have offered detailed definitions to language learning strategies over the years. The earliest definition of Language Learning Strategies according to Weinstein and Mayer (1986), pointed out the learner's behavioral and thoughts engaged during language learning. Wenden (1987), later defined language strategies as any activity performed by the learner to make learning simpler, to retain, and to retrieve knowledge. Meanwhile, Oxford (1990) defined Learning Strategies as "specific activities performed by the learner to make learning simpler, faster, more pleasant, more self-directed, more successful, and more transferrable to other contexts". In other words, learning strategies are learner's method to acquire the target language successfully. There is a repertoire of language learning strategies. Experts in the field have also proposed their own taxonomies of language learning strategies. Learners that have a well-functioning diversity of language learning techniques are more independent and successful in language acquisition. Most language learning strategies share similarities despite their different taxonomies. Nevertheless, Oxford's (1990) categorization of language acquisition methods is the broadest. Oxford (1990) classified language acquisition

techniques into two categories: direct and indirect, each with three subcategories. Broadly speaking, direct strategies are divided into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. On the other hand, indirect strategies include meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies. Studies on LLS continue to be an interest in many research (Sani & Ismail, 2021).

2.3. Successful Language Learners

The techniques that language learners adopt are frequently linked to their performance, according to research findings. Bayuong, Hashim and Yunus (2019) remark that a good language learner possesses distinct characteristics than the others in learning a language. This statement echoes the earlier findings by Rubin (1975) that listed aptitude, motivation and opportunity as three main aspects contributing to a learner's success. These three factors are not mutually exclusive. With regards to aptitude, language learners who are willing and accurate guessers are good language learners. They have the ability to collect and store information efficiently, and retrieve it when necessary. Deriving meanings from clues given in the phrases or sentences they hear are also their abilities. Additionally, they are highly motivated to communicate and are opportunists. They consistently seize opportunities to practice the target language and if none exists, they create the opportunities for themselves by exposing themselves to the language such as in movies, radio and songs. In short, good language learners are smart guessers, motivated to communicate, high-spirited to learn, sensitive to language form, attends to meaning and always monitor themselves and others. However, the strategies used vary based on a variety of factors such as the task's difficulty, age, environment, learning styles, family socioeconomic situation, and cultural differences (Nazri, Yunus, & Mohamad Nazri, 2016). In general, it appears that learners' attitudes, abilities, and tactics determine whether or not they will be able to understand the complexities of language.

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

This study applied a quantitative survey method to determine the relationship between the variables involved. The use of quantitative method for data collection and data analysis make generalization possible (Daniel, 2016). With regards to the samples and patterns, the study of Language Learning Strategies within a particular area or zone can be reflective of the wider population.

3.2. Populations and Sampling

This study employed Malaysian level 2 primary students aged 10 to 12 years old. The scope was narrowed to a population that was selected by purposive sampling which included all Level 2 students at a rural school in Debak, Sarawak. In total, there are 54 students involved, 16 boys and 38 girls. These students comprised of all students from Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6. Selection of Level 2 stu-

dents is pertinent to this finding for they are the first batch of students who no longer sit for “Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah” (UPSR) due to its abolishment effective 2021. The finding of this study therefore helps to identify their language learning strategies which directly contribute towards their mastery level in the classroom-based assessment (PBD).

3.3. Research Instruments

The research instrument is entitled “Reading Strategies by Level 2 ESL Learners”, which consists of 3 main subsections which include “What I do to read more?”, “What I do to understand what I read?” and “What I do when I don’t understand what I read?”. Under each subsection, there are various statements about language learning particularly related to reading strategies employed by the students. In total, the instruments amount to 16 statements. The responses by the respondents are recorded using 3-point Likert scale. Three varying levels in the Likert scale refer to the statements that “Really describe me”, “Somewhat describes me” or “Does not like me”.

Adapted version of Young Learners’ Language Strategy Use Survey by [Cohen and Oxford \(2002\)](#) was used as the research instrument for this study. The instrument has been validated by the Head of English Panel of the school. Adaptation is made as this study only focuses on reading strategies instead of all the language skills. Hence, this research instrument only includes survey questions on the language strategy for reading skills. Secondly, adaptation is made with regards to the 3-point Likert scale. Instead of marking a (+) if the statement really describes them, marking a check (✓) if the statement is somewhat like them or write a minus (–) if the statement isn’t like them, the instrument uses emoticons. Emoticons are used as visual representations are more relatable to these students. According to [Alshenqeeti \(2016\)](#), emoticons are filling the gap in communication for nonverbal indications regarding the message’s meaning and emotion.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved three stages. The first stage in the data collection process is to obtain permission to gather data for the study. According to [Creswell \(2015\)](#), permission could be sought at three levels: from those in charge of the organization, from those giving the data, and from institutional review bodies on campus. Hence, permission letter was first written to the District Education Officer and followed by consent letters from the school authorities and parents of all the Level 2 students involved. Secondly, the research instruments were distributed and ministered to the Level 2 students. Finally, the surveys were collected and analyzed.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis of data was conducted using descriptive analysis from Statistical Pack-

age for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. The frequency and percentage scores were interpreted to identify the preferred language learning strategy used.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

The findings of this study focus on the language learning strategies employed by the students especially for reading skill. The findings cover three subsections namely “What I do to read more?”, “What I do to understand what I read” and “What I do when I don’t understand what I read”.

Table 1 records pupils’ responses when asked of their strategies to read more. For this section, the pupils were asked to respond to four statements. The highest rated statement was Statement 4 with 39 samples (72.2%). Majority of the pupils responded that they search for easy-reading materials. Meanwhile, 59.3% responded to Statement 1 as somewhat describing them. These 32 pupils claim to somewhat read a lot in English. Interestingly, Statement 1 and Statement 3 share a similar percentage (14.8%) with 8 samples. These two groups of pupils responded that they neither like to read a lot in English language nor find things to read that interest them.

In contrast, the lowest percentage for a statement that really describes the pupils in what they do to read more fell to Statement 1. Only 14 samples (25.9%) that they do extensive reading in the English language. As for the statement that somewhat describes the respondent, Statement 4 was least preferred. Only 12 samples (2%) somewhat look for non-challenging reading texts. Meanwhile, the lowest percentage for statements that do not describe the respondents as far as what they do to read more is concerned pointed to Statement 4. Only 3 samples (5.6%) responded that looking for things to read that are not hard really do not describe them.

Table 2 records the choice of strategies the pupils use to comprehend reading text. The highest response garnered from the pupils indicated that they look at the headings. A total of 36 samples (66.7%) responded that Statement 5 really described them. Meanwhile, the highest percentage for the statement that somewhat described them pointed to Statement 1. A total of 32 samples (59.4%) samples somewhat agreed that they derive the main idea by skimming. Additionally, Statement 7 was selected as the highest percentage for the statement that does not describe the pupils. In essence, a total of 14 samples (15.9%) responded that they do not stop to think about what they read.

On the contrary, the statement that really describes the pupils yet with the least percentage pointed to Statement 7. Only 13 samples (24.1%) stop to think about what they read in order to understand what they read. As for the statement that somewhat describes the respondents, language learning strategy in Statement 2 is least preferred among the pupils. Only 11 samples (20.4%) somewhat agreed that they look for important facts to comprehend what they read. Additionally, as for the statement that does not describe the respondents, the lowest percentage goes to Statement 5. Only 5 samples (9.3%) look at the

headings.

Table 3 tabulates the responses by the pupils on what do they do when they do not understand what they read. Majority of the pupils indicated that they use dictionary to find the meaning. This response is recorded by a total of 38 samples (70.4%) who shared that Statement 2 really described them. Meanwhile, the higher percentage for the statement that somewhat described them pointed to Statement 1. A total of 20 samples (37.0%) somewhat agreed that they predict the meaning by using contextual clues. Additionally, a total of 14 samples (25.9%) described Statement 1 as not describing them.

Table 1. What I do to read more.

Item	Scores		
	Really describes me	Somewhat describes me	Does not describe me
1. I read a lot in English language.	14 (25.9%)	32 (59.3%)	8 (14.8%)
2. I read for fun in English language.	35 (64.8%)	15 (27.8%)	4 (7.4%)
3. I find things to read that interests me.	31 (57.4%)	15 (27.8%)	8 (14.8%)
4. I look for things to read that are not hard.	39 (72.2%)	12 (22.2%)	3 (5.6%)

Table 2. What I do to understand what I read.

Item	Scores		
	Really describes me	Somewhat describes me	Does not describe me
1. I skim over a reading to get the main idea.	14 (25.9%)	32 (59.3%)	8 (14.8%)
2. I look for important facts.	34 (63.0%)	11 (20.4%)	9 (16.7%)
3. I read things more than once.	24 (44.5%)	19 (35.2%)	11 (20.4%)
4. I look at the pictures and what is under the pictures.	32 (59.3%)	14 (25.9%)	8 (14.8%)
5. I look at the headings.	36 (66.7%)	13 (24.1%)	5 (9.3%)
6. I think about what will come next in the reading.	34 (63.0%)	12 (22.2%)	8 (14.8%)
7. I stop to think about what I just read.	13 (24.1%)	27 (50.0%)	14 (25.9%)
8. I underline parts that seem important.	33 (61.1%)	12 (22.2%)	9 (16.7%)
9. I mark the reading in different colours to help me understand.	32 (59.3%)	12 (22.2%)	10 (18.5%)
10. I check to see how much I understood.	22 (40.7%)	22 (40.7%)	10 (18.5%)

Table 3. What I do when I don't understand what I read.

Item	Scores		
	Really describes me	Somewhat describes me	Does not describe me
1. I guess the meaning by using clues from other parts of the passage.	20 (37.0%)	20 (37.0%)	14 (25.9%)
2. I use a dictionary to find the meaning.	38 (70.4%)	5 (9.3%)	11 (20.4%)

On the contrary, the statement that really describes the pupils yet with the least percentage pointed to Statement 1. Only 20 samples (37.0%) describe themselves as guessing the meaning by using clues from other parts of the passage. As for the statement that somewhat describes the respondents, language learning strategy in Statement 2 is less preferred among the pupils. Only 5 samples (9.3%) somewhat agreed that they use a dictionary to find the meaning when they do not understand what they read. Similarly, as for the statement that does not describe the respondents, the lowest percentage also goes to Statement 2. Only 11 samples (20.4%) agreed that the statement fit their description.

4.2. Discussion

The discussion shall focus on answering the research questions. There are two research questions on the most preferred and the least preferred language learning strategies for reading skill among Level 2 Malaysian ESL learners. Both of these research questions are discussed based on the overall frequency and percentages of reading strategies.

RQ1: What is the most preferred Language Learning Strategy (LLS) used for reading skill among Level 2 primary pupils?

For “Section 1: What I do to read more?”, the most preferred LLS is “to look for things that are not hard” with a frequency of 32% or 79.2%. These results revealed that the pupils are more inclined towards affective strategies to promote their reading skills in English. The affective methods, according to Oxford (1990) Classification of Language Learning Strategies, assist students in monitoring their emotions, motivation, and attitude as they relate to learning. The pupils are all from rural setting hence they are minimally exposed to English language except in school during English lessons. This affects their confidence in using the target language. Consequently, they opt to read stuff that are not too tough to grasp. Meanwhile, for “Section 2: What I do to understand what I read?”, the most preferred strategy is “to look at the headings” with a frequency of 36 students or (66.7%). This shows that the students would do a general survey of the text before proceed with their reading. They find it beneficial to get a rough idea of what the text is about. As for “Section 3: What I do when I don’t understand what I read?”, most of the students (70.4%) prefer using a dictionary than guessing the meaning using contextual clues. This shows that the students are more confident with the standard definition given by the book instead of relying on their own interpretation. Based on the data, it is found that the most preferred Language Learning Strategy (LLS) used for reading skill among the Level 2 primary pupils is affective strategy. Interestingly, the findings also reveal that the students seem to be influenced by their first impression of the reading texts. The most preferred strategies “to read more” and “to understand what they read” both share the same technique of “looking” for the safer and easier way to maneuver their way to comprehend the text. Their impression of the text determines their motivation to read and understand it.

RQ2: What is the least Language Learning Strategy (LLS) used for reading skill among Level 2 primary pupils?

For “Section 1: What I do to read more?”, the least preferred LLS is “to read a lot in English language” and “to find things that interest them” which share the same frequency of 8 or 14.8%. These results revealed that the pupils are not keen to read. They neither have the reading habit neither the desire to find reading materials that interest them. This could be due to their heavy use of smartphones which have more interactive features and are more appealing. [Wok and Mohamed \(2017\)](#) report that Malaysians prefer to spend more time online rather than watching television or listening to radio. Meanwhile, for “Section 2: What I do to understand what I read?”, the least preferred strategy is “to stop to think about what they just read” with a frequency of 14 students or (25.9%). As for “Section 3: What I do when I don’t understand what I read?”, few students (25.9%) prefer guessing the meaning using clues from other parts of the text than referring to dictionary. Based on the data, it is found that the least preferred Language Learning Strategy (LLS) used for reading skill among the Level 2 primary pupils is cognitive strategy. The findings also reveal their lack of interest in reading. The students are more intrinsically motivated by the superficial look of the reading text instead of the intellectual engagement with the content of the passage. Learners’ unwillingness to grasp the language in use might be attributed to a lack of vocabulary knowledge ([Chiew & Ismail, 2021](#)).

5. Conclusion

The findings suggested that the preferred language learning strategies among Malaysian ESL learners are inclined to one particular type language learning strategy. The most preferred language learning strategy is affective strategy while cognitive strategy is least favored. Hence, teachers need to consider these factors in planning lessons. For students who leaned towards affective strategy, teachers need to consider preparing reading passages that would visually encourage them to read further. Teachers must therefore be attentive of the pupils’ interest such as their favourite characters. Integration of the pupils’ element of interest in the reading text would motivate the pupils to read purposefully and lower their anxiety. Meanwhile, in order to encourage more cognitive strategies in reading, teachers need to be intentional in the choice of text used. Teachers must select reading materials that challenge them to use their cognitive ability. For instance, teachers can use this opportunity to train the pupils Higher Order Thinking skills. For example, teachers may pose questions related to the headings or ask the pupils to paraphrase the heading based on the content they have read.

Language learning and mastery are enhanced with the employment of language strategies. Becoming effective strategy users start with realizing the strategies they use and how to use the strategies. This study has enabled the researcher to identify the most preferred and the least preferred learning strategies among the ESL learners in Malaysia. This echoes [Sani and Ismail \(2021\)](#) statement that

finding such as this is foundational to inform instructional practice in a language learning setting. Students might climb the ladder of success in language acquisition faster and better with correct direction, practice, and, most significantly, the instructors' well-equipped understanding of those tactics (Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021). One of the pedagogical implications, in light of current educational developments and needs, is that language teachers play an important role in introducing students to various reading strategies, allowing students to select strategies that are appropriately aligned with their reading purposes and task requirements. Teachers are crucial in identifying and delivering effective language learners' language learning strategies to a wide range of students (Mahalingam & Yunus, 2017).

For future studies, researches may expand on the sample size to include pupils from mixed background of multiracial and different localities such as urban, suburban and rural schools. Additionally, the language strategies are to cover more or all language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing instead of only one. This would give a clearer picture to inform teachers in their classroom instructional practice.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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