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Sofena Imas Bangkam, Harwati Hashim

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## Identifying Writing Strategies Applied by ESL Primary School Pupils in a Rural School

Sofena Imas Bangkam<sup>1,2</sup>, Harwati Hashim<sup>2</sup>

SK Ulu Lemanak, D/A Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah Lubok Antu, 95900, Lubok Antu, Sarawak, Malaysia<sup>1</sup>, Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia<sup>1,2</sup>

### Abstract

Pupils have different ways of learning. In Malaysia, pupils of mixed ability are grouped together in a class in order to maximise their learning input. Therefore, identifying the pupils' application of language learning strategy is important for teachers as it helps to organize their learning, thus making learning engaging, efficient, and meaningful. Writing skill especially, is an important aspect of acquiring language as Malaysian exams are focused on this skill. So, this paper aims to identify language learners' writing strategies used among ESL primary school pupils in a rural school in Malaysia. The methodology employed in this study is questionnaire. Findings reveal that most pupils in the school apply writing strategies metacognitively to acquire the English language. Thus, these learning strategies could be of help for a teacher to plan and execute purposeful and meaningful writing lessons in order to ensure optimal learning that suit the pupils. The objectives of the study are; to identify the frequency of application of writing strategies among young English language learners in a rural school in Malaysia, and explore the implications of writing strategies on teaching and learning the language in a rural school in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategy, ESL, Rural School, Writing Strategies

### Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been a growing concern and interest over the field of language teaching and learning with greater emphasis put on pedagogical knowledge - teaching rather than learning (Lavasani & Faryadres, 2011). Conferences often lean towards reflective practices, gamified learning, and social media in education among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in urban schools. However, far too little attention has been paid to language learning strategies that pupils employ to process and retain new information, particularly in the context of writing strategies among young ESL learners in a rural area of Malaysia. Ellis (1994) claims that the studies of language learning strategies are scarce for findings could address individual differences in learning a second language. Furthermore, Wiling (1994) questions whether there is relationship

between one's preference for language learning strategies and biographical information such as location of language learners. The study failed to establish such relationship directly.

Language learning strategies that are applied correctly "make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more independent, and more effective" (Oxford, 1990). When the preferred strategies have been identified, English language teachers could design and carry out more meaningful and purposeful lessons that the pupils could relate to their previous knowledge. The 2004 School Certificate Examination Report on English Language 2 (MOE, 2005), revealed that majority of the candidates have yet to master the writing skills in English. It was reported that pupils in rural schools fared worse than those in urban schools. As reported by Nooreiny et al. (2003) and Talif & Edwin (1990), the level of English proficiency in rural schools is much lower than the level in the urban schools although students went through the same curriculum. As the public examination require them to write essays, it poses a great challenge for them because it demands them to apply many cognitive and linguistic strategies of which they are uncertain (Maghsoudi & Haririan, 2013). Yunus and Chien (2016) stated that writing is difficult because it requires wide knowledge in grammar, writing mechanics, organisational skills, and writing styles. Moreover, according to the Education Blueprint 2013-2025, teachers are to be facilitators of the teaching and learning process in the classroom. By first identifying the writing strategies applied by majority of the pupils, the English language teachers will be able to devise and plan meaningful and purposeful lessons that suit the pupils' level of proficiency.

There is a scarcity of such research carried out in the Sarawak state of Malaysia, specifically in the rural areas. Thus, this paper aims to identify writing strategies as a language learning strategy that these pupils apply to acquire the English language in classrooms and its implications.

### **Research Problem**

Identifying pupils' writing strategy is crucial as in Malaysia, the English subject is graded in two papers, namely Comprehension (Paper 1) and Composition (Paper 2). Composition is generally a challenging paper especially for pupils in rural schools as it is graded on itself and requires better proficiency to string error-free sentences which consequently produces coherent stories. Accuracy is highly emphasized in the Composition paper as higher bands are awarded to usage of high command of vocabulary with minimal grammatical errors. In Malaysia, it was found that pupils in rural schools did not practice using the English language outside the classrooms and adopted very limited learning strategies. (Thiyagarajah, 2003). Pupils have limited vocabulary to articulate their ideas coherently in answering examination questions. Most of them feel demotivated to improve as they feel that writing is challenging. He argues that "if teachers can develop students' awareness of the language learning strategies then the performance of rural schools can be improved." (Thiyagarajah, 2003)

Thus, by drawing these two problems, the article aims to identify the language learning strategy, which is writing, employed by pupils in a rural school.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, the following questions guided my research:

1. What is the frequency of application of writing strategies among young English language learners in a rural school in Malaysia?

2. What are the implications of writing strategies on teaching and learning the English language in a rural school in Malaysia?

## **Literature Review**

### **Definition of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)**

There is a variety of definition to what constitutes as language learning strategies by researchers. Wenden and Rubin (1987) define learning strategies as "... steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information." Richards and Platt (1992) state that learning strategies are "deliberate behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning in order to enhance their understanding, learning process, or remember and recall new information." Brown (1980) stated language learning strategies as processes that may contribute directly to learning. Chamot and Kupper (1987) went further by defining language learning strategies as processes, methods, approaches, and actions that pupils apply to help learning and recall of linguistic knowledge. Hence, in other words, language learning strategies are actions that a language learner applies to make learning faster, more enjoyable and more effective to retain new information.

### **Categorisation of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)**

According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are divided into direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are specific ways that involve use of language, divided into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies (Lee, 2010). Memory strategy in language learning refers to using effective ways to help a language learner in remembering and retain new information. Other than that, cognitive strategies, on the other hand, "aid the learner in putting together, consolidating, elaborating, and changing the knowledge of the language and culture" (Oxford, 2013). Compensation strategies, Oxford (1990) claims, refer to a learner finding similarities from the context of the reading and using non-verbal communication such as gestures to convey meaning when the exact meaning of a statement is not understood.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) points out that indirect strategies are divided into three subcategories which are metacognitive, affective, and social. Metacognitive strategies allow pupils to relate to new knowledge and arrange and plan one's learning. As for affective strategies, it is useful in regulating emotion by lowering a language learner's anxiety hence creating a fun and conducive learning surrounding. An example of affective strategy is singing an action song with hand gestures and varying speeds to attract the interest of language learners, as well as lowering their language learning anxiety. When a language learner feels that their learning environment is safe, social strategies could be further employed to ensure that learning takes place effectively. Social strategies are strategies that are useful when interacting with other pupils. (Wasilewska, 2011) Pupils are encouraged to ask their friends questions (Zare, 2012), and cooperate with their groupmates by participating in classroom activities. Social strategy is a suitable approach to be used during a listening and speaking lesson where language learners are encouraged to interact with each other using the target language. Furthermore, pupils who apply social strategies are able to empathise others by being aware and sensitive of how others around them feel emotionally.

### **Good Language Learners**

Knowledge of the characteristics of good language learners can help pupils increase their language learning efficiency (Sewell, 2003). This realization puts great emphasis on taking the role of an active learner in the process. As a result, a language learner would be able to acquire a language at a faster rate, making acquiring and learning a language more effective.

Good language learners are easily identified for they exhibit the following characteristics (Rubin, 1975):

1. making accurate guesses,
2. practices the language whenever possible,
3. communicates in the language as often as possible,
4. monitor their speech,
5. pays attention to meaning, and
6. attends to form (grammar)

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This is a quantitative research design which uses a short questionnaire consisting of 16 items as its single source of data collection. The questions are focused on writing strategies, adapted from 'Young Learners' Language Strategy Use Survey' by Andrew D. Cohen and Rebecca L. Oxford in 2002.

#### **Research Sample**

10 samples were selected by purposive sampling due to their availability to the researcher. They are currently studying in a rural school in Malaysia, a school in which the researcher is currently teaching in. Most of the samples are aged 11 years-old but due to lack of samples of the same age, the researcher selected a few 10-years-old pupils as samples. Samples ranged from low to average proficiency.

#### **Research Findings**

The findings of this paper are discussed under the language skill of writing. A discussion on ESL language learners' writing strategies will be further discussed below.

**Writing Skills**

Table 1: What I Do to Write More

STRATEGY	SOUNDS SOMEWHAT LIKE ME	DOES NOT SOUND LIKE ME
If the alphabet is different, I practice writing it.	9	1
I take class notes in the language.	6	4
I write other notes in the language.	7	3
I write letters to other people in the language.	2	8
I write short sentences in the language.	7	3
TOTAL	31/50	19/50
Mode	7	3
Median	6	3
Mean	6.2	3.8

This section of the survey required respondents to give information on how strategies they employed in order to write more using the English language. Almost all respondents attempted to write more by practicing to write alphabets, taking class notes, writing notes to their friends using English, and write short sentences in the language, except for writing letters to their friends using the English language.

The respondents were able to read, however they had limited vocabulary bank. Therefore, writing a letter in English would be a struggle for the respondents. This could be the reason why the frequency for this item is low.

Table 2: What I Do to Write Better

STRATEGY	SOUNDS SOMEWHAT LIKE ME	DOES NOT SOUND LIKE ME
I plan what I am going to write.	5	5
I use a dictionary or glossary.	5	5
I read what I wrote to see if it is good.	5	5
I ask someone to correct my writing.	4	5
I rewrite what I wrote to make it better.	8	2
I check my spelling by referring to a dictionary.	3	7
I ask my friend to check my grammar.	2	8
TOTAL	32/70	42/70
Mode	5	5
Median	5	5
Mean	4.5	6

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they applied strategies to write better. Based on the summary of results above, half of the respondents planned, used dictionaries, and read what they wrote while the other half did not. Most of them do not ask someone to proofread their writing and check their spelling by referring to a dictionary. However, in class they often check their spelling by referring to their textbooks and notes from previous lessons their teacher had given to them. However, they would rewrite their sentences to make it better.

Table 3: What I Do if I Cannot Think of a Word or a Phrase I Want to Write

STRATEGY	SOUNDS SOMEWHAT LIKE ME	DOES NOT SOUND LIKE ME
I ask someone for the word or phrase I need.	7	3
I look for words in my textbook.	7	3
I try to say it in a different way.	8	2
I use words from my own language but add new endings to those words.	3	7
TOTAL	25/30	15/30
Mode	7	3
Median	7	3
Mean	6.25	3.75

The majority of those who responded to the questionnaire applied writing strategies when they could not think of a word or phrase to write by asking someone, looking for words in their textbooks, and say it in a different way. Only 3 respondents used words from their native language but added new endings to those words. As observed, most respondents preferred to use the translation method when brainstorming for words or phrases to write. The respondents had bilingual notes and dictionaries to guide them during the learning process.

Table 4: Total percentage and frequency of samples who use writing strategies

Writing Strategies	Total Frequency	Total Percentage
Sounds Somewhat Like Me	81/150	52%
Does Not Sound Like Me	73/150	48%

Slightly more than half of the respondents (52%) were found to have applied writing strategies during English language lessons. The frequency could be improved in the future by making writing lessons more interesting, thus cultivating their interest in writing in English language.



## Discussion

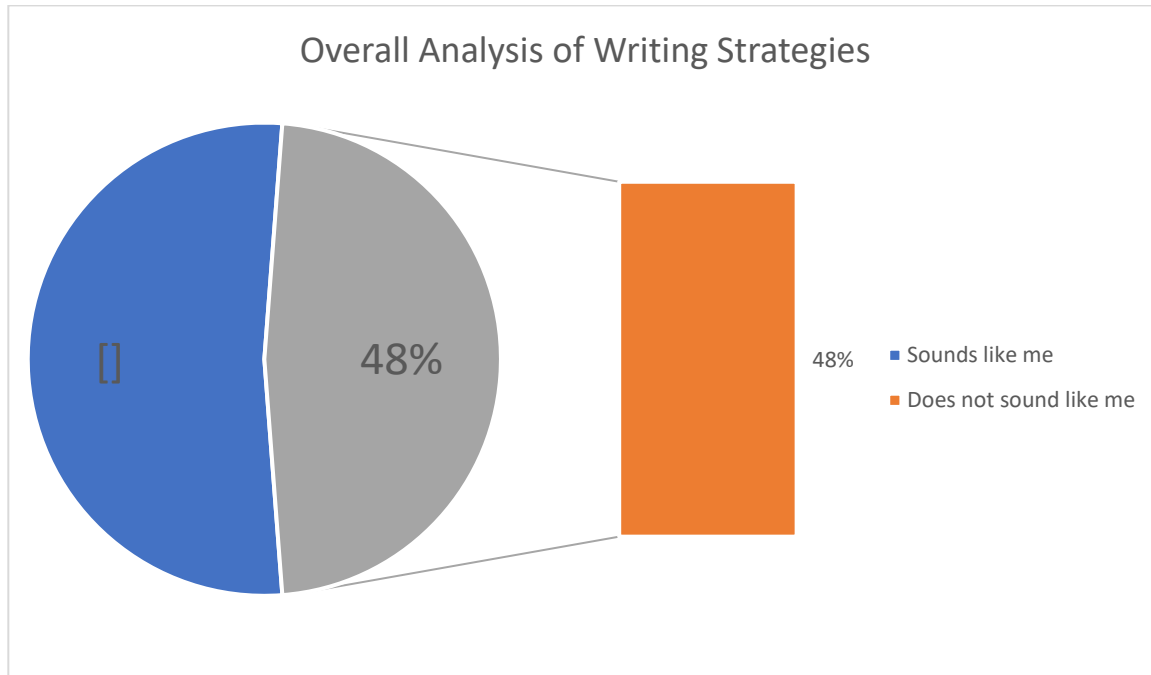


Figure 1: Overall analysis of writing strategies

Based on Figure 1, it can be deduced that out of the 10 samples, 52% of them were keen on using writing strategies and 48% were not keen on using the strategies in their learning. By comparing Table 1 with Table 2 and Table 3, the samples were keen on applying writing strategies such as taking initiatives to write more, and what they do when they are at a loss for words. However, based on Table 2, most of them lacked practice in writing more because this section scored higher in terms of frequency. This may be due to the reason that they lacked interest in writing in English more often. Acquiring, learning, and applying the English language in their daily lives pose a great challenge to them as the language is only spoken during English language activities inside or outside the classroom. Thus, usage of the language among the respondents are scarce and minimal. The samples do, however, attempt to practice to write more, and put in effort to compensate for the words they struggled to remember or use during writing.

Therefore, samples were prone to applying metacognitive strategies for writing skill. Metacognitive strategies are a subcategory of indirect learning strategies. Metacognitive strategies involve arranging and planning for one's learning. From the findings above, generally when they faced difficulty in writing, they attempted to find a solution either by writing short sentences to minimize grammatical mistakes, asked for someone's help to write better, and rewriting a sentence to make it better. By applying the metacognitive strategies, their learning is organized. Furthermore, their language acquisition is enhanced through this strategy. Macaro (2002) claims that awareness and application of language learning strategies lead to effective language acquisition.

However, a broader perspective has been adapted by Neiman et. al (1976) who argue that good language learners used more language learning strategies than poor language learners. The main concern of most research has been about identifying and observing what good language

learners do to learn a second language (Rubin & Wenden, 1987). Gnutzmann (2005) has highlighted the relevance of descriptions of a good language learner in applying language learning strategies. He argues that it ignores learners' differences, because language learners can improve by being strategic in their learning.

There are few implications that can be derived from the findings. Firstly, the samples were not keen on checking their work with their friends for grammatical errors or refer to the dictionary for corrections. Each class was equipped with a few English dictionary for pupils to use during English lessons and they are advised to fully utilize it. However, most of them did not use it as often to discover new meaning and enhance their learning. A teacher could encourage the pupils to use the dictionary more often by designing more student-centred activities that involve them using the dictionary to find meaning of new words. As a start, a teacher could get the pupils to work in pairs or small groups so that they could help each other to get familiar with using a dictionary. Pairs are selected by the teacher where one would assist their friend whose language proficiency is weaker so as to ensure both obtain new knowledge other than effectively bridging the gap between learners of different levels of proficiency.

Willing (1993) found that there are four language learning styles; authority-oriented, communicative, analytical, and concrete. A lesson designed to help language learners to get familiar with using a dictionary would refer to concrete learning style. By applying different form of learning styles, a teacher provides a variety of learning styles for the pupils to discover their preferred learning styles. In addition, as different pupils have their own learning styles, a teacher caters to different needs during a language lesson by applying different learning styles. As a result, language learners are able to use a plethora of writing strategies in order to improve areas of writing strategies that require further improvement. In their study, Wong and Nunan (2011) claims that past research showed that since not all learners immediately discover suitable learning strategies, explicit strategy training and experimenting with different strategies are encouraged as it would lead to effective learning. Strategy training should include explanation, helpful handouts, meaningful and purposeful activities, brainstorming sessions, and useful materials for a learner's reference (Lavasani & Faryadres, 2011). Hence, a teacher should allow language learners some time to find the right language learning strategies.

Other than that, playing games like 'Broken Radio' could encourage them to use the language more often in an interesting way. In order to adapt it for the language skill of writing, the teacher could have pupils to write a word each on a piece of paper and pass it to the next player for them to continue until they form a coherent sentence. In addition, such activity would spur them to mingle with their classmates by using the English language. As seen in the tables of findings above, most respondents did not ask their friends to help them in the language. They preferred to refer to their notes or textbooks to proofread their writing and correct their grammar. The pupils may be shy and afraid of being laughed at by their friends, thus the importance of cultivating respect among pupils. Even so, the respondents were found to show some characteristics of good language learners which are attending to their own grammar and paying attention to meaning.

It is of paramount importance for a teacher to have adequate knowledge pertaining to her pupils, especially in the aspect of their interest and learning styles. At the beginning of the year, the teacher can prepare and distribute a short questionnaire to pupils to find out their preferred learning style

(Hismanoglu & Murat, 2000). Thus, the teacher would be able to discover the pupils' favourite classroom activities and their motivation to learn a language. From the results of the questionnaire, the teacher would be able to discover the pupils' preferred language learning strategies and subsequently incorporate it into her lessons.

### Conclusion

As a conclusion, pupils apply writing strategies metacognitively in a rural school. Writing skill is crucial to master as it ensures their ideas flow out beautifully and coherently in the addition that they are to write essays in Composition (Paper 2) for a public examination. By identifying the writing strategies applied by language learners, the English language teachers can apply teaching approaches that suit their pupils' learning styles. For example, as it was found that pupils prefer to refer to their textbooks and notes from previous lessons than a dictionary, teachers may help pupils to prepare a small booklet dedicated to vocabulary, arranged according to the topics in the textbooks for ease of reference. By providing them more exposure in the English language, their vocabulary bank would be enriched with new words. Furthermore, the booklet would be handy for them to read during their free time which means there is more time for them to acquire the language outside classrooms. It is hoped in the future that the disparity between urban and rural schools can be bridged closer. As for future research recommendation, a study pertaining to the difference of final examination marks of pupils' before and after their respective English language teachers plan writing lessons that cater to their preferred writing strategy can be carried out.

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