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Language Learning Strategies in Acquiring English Language Skills among Year 5 Pupils in Rural Areas in Southern Malaysia

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Abstract

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and their advantages in enhancing and acquiring second language learning skills are not consciously known, especially to young learners. The main objective of this study is to identify the most preferred language learning strategies by the Year 5 primary pupils in rural areas in Southern Malaysia and the least practiced strategies in learning the English language. This study adopted a quantitative research design by adapting the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning questionnaire as a research instrument. The data was collected from 70 respondents by using a simple random sampling technique and then analysed descriptively. Through a comparison of means, this study had discovered that various strategies were practiced by the respondents. However, the most employed strategy is memory strategies, while the affective strategies are favoured the least. It is hoped that this study may give some insights and benefits to the ESL teachers in enhancing their teaching and learning process by introducing and emphasising various learning strategies for better self-regulated learning.

Keywords: ESL, Language Learning Strategies, Rural Primary Schools

Introduction

An Overview

Language Learning Strategies among language practitioners has been an interesting research topic, especially in finding out the strategies adopted by the successful learners in which are applicable for the less successful learners specifically in second language acquisition. Learning strategies can be classified into six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social (Oxford, 2003). According to Scarcela and Oxford (1992) learning strategies can be defined as particular acts, behaviours, procedures, or techniques employed by the learners to enhance their own learning, such as seeking out discussion partners or encouraging oneself to face a tough language job. As for

Chamot and Kupper (1989); O'Malley and Chamot (1990), they described language learning strategies as precise thoughts and activities that maximise the learning process and comprehension of new input and information. These methods become a valuable toolkit for active, aware, and purposeful self-regulation of learning when the learner actively picks techniques that fit his or her learning style and the second language task at hand. It is also crucial to recognise that individual students' learning styles and strategies can complement or clash with a specific educational methodology (Oxford, 2003). This has further been supported by Hashim et al (2018) that learners must be able to recognise their individual learning styles and preferences in order to determine which language learning strategies are best for them, so that the methods can become habits and eventually turn them into good language learners.

The first publication on English language learning strategies dates from 1996, when Mohamed Amin published a seminal doctoral dissertation that sparked considerable interest in the field of language learning in the years that followed (Saad et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to Macaro (2006), there has been a lot of interest in the learning processes that people use when learning and utilising second languages. Despite this long history, Saad et al (2012) believe that the body of literature in Malaysia on English teaching practices is still in its early stages. While English language is one of the most important subjects in the Malaysian education system, there are insufficient literatures regarding the language learning strategies employed by the primary pupils, specifically in the rural area.

In the last few decades, the field of language learning and instruction has seen significant changes. The focus on deploying various teaching approaches no longer provides language teachers with a solution. Despite their efforts, students' language learning, particularly in the setting of second languages, has not improved significantly. The focus has switched to the learners; learner autonomy is now the focus. Unfortunately, primary pupils from the rural areas are somehow overlooked at this matter.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to explore the language learning strategies practiced by the Year 5 pupils in rural areas in Southern Malaysia in acquiring English language skills. This study too will identify the most and least preferred strategies which include memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies affective strategies and social strategies. Thus, this will serve as a guideline for the teachers in preparing more relevant materials and solutions in improving the pupils' English language learning in school depending on the personal capabilities. This research will be grounded on one main research question;

1. Which Language Learning Strategy is employed the most by the pupils in rural school to acquire the English language skills?

Literature Review

The role of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) in Language Learning and Teaching

The role of LLS has bring a major change in the teaching and learning process in Malaysia education which can be seen in the transformation that take place in Malaysia's education. One of the transformations is to use student centered approach in the teaching and learning process in which had an influence on the learning strategies used in classroom. One of the main roles of LLS is to help learners develop their own awareness of thinking processes such as meta cognitive and help learners to acquire effective ways to sustain the

information that come from the learning environment. Acquiring and using good language learning strategies can help learners to improve their literacy skills as learners with poor performance in classroom can improve their learning performance by choosing and using the appropriate learning strategies (Chamot, 1998). Hence, the proper use of LLS help learners to learn and acquire new language. The correct choice of LLS helped to produce learners with great communicative competency (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Communicative competency is one of the positive outcomes from the proper use of LLS. This indicates that learners who are competent in communication are the learners who are able to use LLS appropriately and apply the knowledge to other subject areas and become proficient in the target language. Therefore, it is important for educators to identify the appropriate language learning strategies which are suitable for their classroom.

However, there are obstacle in identifying and exploring the type of LLS use by learners. This is due to the fact that LLS usually can only be traced from the behaviours shown by language learners while in the process of teaching and learning (Griffiths, 2004). Therefore, studies have been conducted to identify the LLS use by learners through various form of data gathering method (Oxford, 1986). The instruments used in this study are one of the data gathering method used to investigate the LLS among learners.

Methodology

The study has employed a survey research design which is a quantitative research method used for collecting data from a set of respondents. In the study, the researchers have identified the issue to be studied, which is to explore the language learning strategies practiced by the Year 5 pupils in rural areas in Southern Malaysia in acquiring English language skills and to identify the most and least preferred strategies which include the memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies affective strategies and social strategies.

This study was conducted in two primary schools situated in the rural areas in Southern Malaysia. A total of 70 simple random samplings among the Year 5 pupils were selected from the two different rural schools. The instrument used for data collection in this study is a survey adapted from the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) which was developed by Rebecca L. Oxford. After getting permission from the respective school administrations, the researchers informed the respondents about the survey and the importance of their contribution to the success of the study. The researchers have clearly explained to the respondents that the survey is not an examination or a test, but just a study that needed carefully considered answers. Only one English lesson (30 minutes) was allocated for the respondents to answer the survey. A separate sitting was conducted for the absentees. The data were collected from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. The data were analysed descriptively. Comparison of means between the different language learning strategies was made to identify the most and least preferred strategies by the primary pupils in rural areas in Southern Malaysia in acquiring the English language skills.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of this research will be explored on the language learning strategies used by two rural primary school pupils. The strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Discussion of strategies used is explained in the following section.

Table 1*Memory Strategies*

No.	Items	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)
1	I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	52.86	35.71	11.43
2	I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	34.29	50.00	15.71
3	I connect the sound of a new English word and a picture of the word to help me remember the word.	34.29	30.00	35.71
4	I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	22.86	37.14	40.00
5	I use rhymes to remember new English words.	30.00	32.86	37.14
6	I use flashcards to remember new English words.	32.86	25.71	41.43
7	I physically act out new English words.	17.14	34.29	48.57
8	I review English lessons often.	27.14	54.29	18.57
9	I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	35.71	35.71	28.57

Based on Table 1, Item 1 is preferred by more than half of the pupils with 52.86%. When the pupils think of the relationships between what they already know and new things they learn in English, they are using memory strategies to learn. The next item that normally used by the pupils in memory strategy is Item 9 which achieves 35.71%. The pupils make use of the location on the page, on the board or the street sign to help them remember new English words or phrases. In contrast, the least preferred item in memory strategy falls on Item 7 (17.14%) in which pupils seldom act out new English words in learning.

Table 2*Cognitive Strategies*

No.	Items	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)
10	I say or write new English words several times.	51.43	51.01	12.86
11	I try to talk like native English speakers.	42.86	24.49	75.57
12	I practice the sounds of English.	51.01	59.19	32.66
13	I use English words I know in different ways.	24.29	42.86	46.94
14	I start conversations in English.	20.00	42.86	71.43
15	I watch English TV shows or movies spoken in English.	27.14	53.06	51.01
16	I read for pleasure in English.	32.66	59.19	51.01
17	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	16.33	59.19	47.14
18	I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	36.73	57.14	48.99
19	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	48.99	46.94	46.94
20	I try to find patterns in English.	32.66	45.71	31.43
21	I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	32.66	59.19	51.01
22	I try not to translate word for word.	36.73	46.94	59.19
23	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	14.29	45.71	57.14

Table 2 shows the frequency of cognitive strategies used by the pupils. From the table, Items 10 recorded the highest frequency (51.43%) among the pupils where they say or write new English words learned several times. Nearly half of the pupils prefer to learn this way. Another item which has the similar result is Item 12 with 51.01%. During the process of learning, the pupils tend to practise the sounds of English to improve pronunciation. On the other hand, only 14.29% of the pupils choose to make summaries of information that they hear or read in English (Item 23).

Table 3*Compensation Strategies*

No.	Items	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)
24	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	75.57	28.57	18.57
25	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	32.66	51.01	59.19
26	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	36.73	53.06	53.06
27	I read English without looking up every new word.	36.73	46.94	59.19
28	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	53.06	27.14	51.01
29	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	24.29	46.94	42.86

From Table 3, Item 24 has the highest frequency. 75.57% of the pupils preferred to make guesses to understand unfamiliar English words. Meanwhile, pupils try to make guess of what the other person will say next during a conversation with 53.06% of the pupils agreed with this (Item 28). However, Item 29 is least favoured by the pupils where 24.29% of the pupils choose another word or phrase with the same meaning to replace the English word that they cannot think of.

Table 4*Metacognitive Strategies*

No.	Item	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)
30	I try to find as many ways as I can to use English.	35.71	35.71	28.57
31	I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	30.00	48.57	35.71
32	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	50.00	28.57	21.43
33	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	44.29	35.71	20.00
34	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	12.86	24.29	62.86
35	I look for people I can talk to in English.	18.57	31.43	50.00
36	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	28.57	32.86	38.57
37	I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	25.71	44.29	30.00
38	I think about my progress in learning English.	31.43	41.43	27.14

Table 4 displays the data of the use of metacognitive strategies in pupils' second language learning. Referring to the table above, it is shown that 62.86% of the pupils do not plan their schedule to have enough time to study English and half of them do not look for people whom they can talk to in English. This data shows that pupils do not spend time and effort to think of learning English. In contrary, only half of the pupils tend to pay attention when someone is speaking English. However, 44.29% of them do try to figure out how to be a better English learner.

Table 5*Affective Strategies*

No.	Item	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)
39	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	38.57	42.86	18.57
40	I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	42.86	34.29	22.86
41	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	10.00	32.86	57.14
42	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	31.43	38.57	30.00
43	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	12.86	24.29	62.86
44	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	15.71	31.43	52.86

According to the table above, 62.86% of the pupils do not have the habits of jotting down their feelings in a language learning diary. This could be meaning that they do not keep track on their learning progress. Besides that, more than half of the pupils do not give themselves a reward or treat when they perform well in English. Item 39 and Item 40 show

that an average number of pupils try to relax whenever they are afraid of using English and also give encouragement to themselves to speak in English even though they are afraid of making mistakes.

Table 6*Social Strategies*

No.	Item	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)
45	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	41.43	35.71	22.86
46	I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	21.43	37.14	41.43
47	I practice English with other pupils.	22.86	45.71	45.71
48	I ask for help from English speakers.	32.86	34.29	32.86
49	I ask questions in English.	17.14	35.71	47.14
50	I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	21.43	34.29	44.29

Table 6 portrays the frequency of social strategies used by the pupils. Item 45 has the highest frequency (41.43%) where it shows that pupils are willing to seek for help such as requesting to slow down or to repeat if they do not understand something in English. However, there is only 17.14% of them will ask questions in English. On the other hand, nearly half of the pupils rarely ask English speakers to correct them when they talk, practise English with other pupils and try to learn about the culture of English speakers.

Table 7*Comparison of Means between different language learning strategies*

	Yes	Maybe	No
Memory Strategies	22.33	26.11	21.56
Cognitive Strategies	18.43	26.29	25.29
Compensation Strategies	22.00	22.67	25.33
Metacognitive Strategies	21.56	25.11	24.44
Affective Strategies	17.67	23.83	28.50
Social Strategies	18.33	26.00	27.33

Table 7 summarises the results on the language learning strategies used by the pupils. Memory strategies recorded the highest frequency which is 22.33%. Chamot (2004) pointed out different cultural background students would have different strategies. According to Tyacke and Mendelsohn (1986) and Shi (2017), Asian students tend to use more memory strategies and compensation strategies rather than communicative strategies. Pupils preferred to relate their new knowledge to their previous knowledge when learning English. Moreover, compensation strategies have a similar result with memory strategies with only a difference of 0.33%. Jabbari and Golkar (2014) established that "learners with a positive attitude employ cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategies more frequently". In fact, the mean scores for 'No' are much higher 'Yes' which mean that these low achieving pupils rarely use language learning strategies in their learning. The data shown is in accordance with Javed and Ali's (2018) statement where they reported that high

achievers were high strategy users where more usage of language learning strategies resulting in high academic achievement of students.

Findings in this study reveal that pupils in rural area use more memory strategies and rarely use other language learning strategies. As stated earlier, high achievers apply more strategies and also apply them accordingly to the goals; therefore, in order to improve the pupils' language learning process, teachers could assist them to learn about other language learning strategies and figure out the ones that suit them most by giving them proper direction and support. With the correct language learning strategies, the possibilities of pupils succeeding in language learning would be higher.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study shows that students apply various types of learning strategies in language learning. It is believed that the use of language learning strategies that suit the students would help them to have better learning experience. On top of that, teachers should also have better understanding in language learning strategies in order to help students learn more successfully and develop learning autonomy (Lee, 2010). Thus, it would be wise for teachers to be aware of their students' preference in order to design materials and activities that will cater to the students' needs and proficiency level. Discovering students' learning strategies and assisting them in the learning process are crucial for successful language learning.

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