

Analyzing Current Language Learning Strategies in Speaking Skills by Form 5 Arts Students

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v12-i2/17863>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v12-i2/17863

Published Online: 17 June 2023

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the frequency and type of language learning strategies used by Form 5 art students to improve their speaking skills. It also further investigated the impact of gender and sociocultural background on language learning strategies. The study participants were 33 Form 5 Arts students from a secondary school in Tawau District. Hence, this research is conducted to analyse the current language learning strategies used by Form 5 Arts students in developing their speaking skills. By understanding the strategies used by these students, we can identify areas for improvement and provide recommendations to enhance their language learning experience. This research will contribute to the field of second language acquisition and inform language teachers about effective strategies to improve students' speaking skills.

Keywords: Art Students, Most-Preferred Strategy, Language Learning Strategies, Speaking Skills

Introduction

Education plays a vital role that will allow many other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved. One of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is Sustainable Development Goal -4 which refers to quality education (UNESCO, 2015). It is aimed at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Even though Malaysia has achieved notable achievements in some SDG indicators, as at Goal Level, Malaysia faces significant challenges in achieving the SDG target for this goal especially to prepare learners as the future workforce with competent communicative skills in English as the second language. As the world becomes more interconnected, the ability to communicate effectively in a second language has become increasingly important (Rao, 2019). Hence, the students need to learn and master English as their communicative language.

Students face challenges as the importance of the English language needs to be fully highlighted among Malaysian schools and universities (Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020). In both primary and secondary schools, the student's ability to master the English language is

assessed based on the four language skills. It is an ongoing assessment in which there are levels of performance that the students need to achieve at every level (Chin et al., 2019). Second-language learners find it difficult to acquire speaking skills. Most secondary school students are unable to converse confidently during speaking activities. According to Tambunan et al (2018), Saurik identifies that most English students are hesitant to speak the target language because they fear making mistakes (Nadesan and Shah, 2020). Nijat et al. in Aziz and Kasinathan (2021) identify that the majority of students were hesitant to speak because they were afraid of speaking in English. Furthermore, ESL students have obviously limited opportunities to use English outside of the classroom, and much communication occurs primarily in the classroom. When little communication occurs, the interaction between students is insufficient to improve students' speaking skills. Even though most students were successful in passing the English test, this does not mean that all of them are fluent in the language. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (2022), Malaysia was ranked 24th out of 111 countries, trailing Singapore, which was ranked second, earning them a very high proficiency level, whereas Malaysia is only listed as a high proficiency level country. Nonetheless, after the MOE's extensive efforts, there should be an improvement. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the language-learning strategies Form 5 Arts students favour to improve their speaking skills.

Banu (2017) identified that students do not have enough encouragement to practise the language outside the classroom. Previous studies suggest that the students are aware of the importance of the English language but are unable to see the immediate need to practice it as a medium of interaction, especially when talking with others who speak the same first language. This view indirectly influenced the students rather negatively toward learning the English language. In short, the students do not have an immediate need to learn the language since it is possible to survive in the community without a good command of soft skills. Thus, the study focused on Form 5 Arts students because they are at a critical stage in their language learning process and are expected to have acquired a certain level of proficiency in their speaking skills. Students must have good speaking skills, as it will allow them to compete globally (Arif & Amin, 2021). By examining the language learning strategies used by the students, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into how they approach speaking skills and identify areas for improvement. Therefore, this study aims to seek answers to the four following questions

- a) What are the least and most used language learning strategies among Form 5 Arts students?
- b) Are there any significant differences in students' use of language learning strategies in terms of gender?

Literature Review

Definitions of Language Learning Strategies

The term "Language Learning Strategies" (LLS) has received many definitions from researchers. Scholars define language learning strategies differently, focusing on how learners deal with information and the types of strategies they employ. According to Chamot (1987), they are methods, deliberate actions, or techniques that learners use to help them learn and recall both content and linguistic information. Language learning strategies are defined by Wenden (1987) from three perspectives: learning behaviours such as learning and regulating the meaning of a second or foreign language, cognitive theory such as learners'

strategic knowledge of language learning, and affective views such as motivation, attitude, and so on. Rubin (1987) went on to define learning strategies as "behaviours, steps, or techniques that language learners use to facilitate language learning." Furthermore, Oxford (1990) defined these strategies as specific actions that learners use to make their learning more efficient, effective, simple, self-directed, enjoyable, and transferable to new contexts. Oxford (1990) also included cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of language learning strategies that enhance learners' language proficiency and self-confidence. In addition, according to MacIntyre (1994), these strategies are the intended actions that language learners choose to facilitate their language communication and acquisition. Ghani (2003), on the other hand, defined these strategies as specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students frequently employ to improve their progress in L2 developing skills, which can aid in the internalisation, storage, retrieval, or use of new language. Even though researchers have provided a variety of definitions for these strategies, it can be concluded that these definitions all revolve around a common fundamental theme: these strategies are procedures, techniques, steps, actions, or approaches that learners intentionally employ during the foreign language learning process.

Classifications of Language Learning Strategies

The essential things in the process of learning are 'what' learners use and 'how' they employ for their learning. Language Learning Strategies always captivate researchers' scrutiny. Researchers found that language learners who use learning strategies are frequently better learners (Adi et al., 2019; Katherine & Melor, 2021). Learners' active roles in their learning and the successful methods they employ when learning a new language together with the increasing prevalence of technology-based approaches. They are steps done by the student to make learning simpler, quicker, more pleasant, more self-directed, more effective, and more adaptable to changing circumstances in the context of a second language (Oxford & Nyiko, 1989). O Malley and Chamot (1990) categorise Language Learning Strategies into three subcategories: metacognitive, cognitive, and social-cultural strategies. Metacognitive enables learners to be aware of their learning process and empowers them to think about their thinking. Thus, it offers learners tools to 'drive their brains' (Eisenhart & DeHaan, 2005).

The pioneer of the strategies field, Rubin (1987) differentiated learning strategies into two main types of learning strategies, direct and indirect strategies which contribute directly or indirectly to learners' language development in linguistics and content areas of information. There are three types of strategies employed by the learners. Learning strategies consist of Cognitive Learning strategies and Metacognitive Learning Strategies directly contribute to learners' learning development. Communicative strategies and social strategies contribute indirectly to learners' learning development. Cognitive Learning strategies refer to steps or operations used in learning or problem-solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning material. Rubin identifies 6 main cognitive learning strategies that contribute directly to language learning. They are clarification and verification, guessing or inductive inference, deductive reasoning, practice, memorisation, and monitoring. Controlling, regulating, or self-directed language learning employs metacognitive techniques. The learning process becomes more apparent to learners, and they become more in charge of their own learning. This leads to enhanced personal capacity for self-regulation, increased ability to manage one's own motivation, and becoming more independent learners.

On the other hand, communicative and social strategies employed by learners are indirectly related to language learning.

Oxford (1990:9); Shereen et al (2022) see the development of learning strategies toward communicative competence. Each of these strategies is subdivided into six groups of learning strategies. The strategies contributing directly to the development of language are memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Direct strategies are specific ways that involve the use of language. There are four subdivisions of memory strategies. First is creating mental linkages, which involve three strategies that form the cornerstone for the rest of the memory strategies namely grouping, sociating or elaborating, and using context. Second, cognitive strategies involve learners practising, receiving, and sending messages, analysing and reasoning, and creating a structure for input or output. The third strategy is compensation strategies, which involves two subdivisions, learners guessing intelligently and overcoming their limitations in speaking and writing. The indirect strategies are metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies are divided into 3 subdivisions that require learners to centre their learning, arrange and plan their learning, and evaluate their learning. Affective strategies are subdivided into learners lowering their anxiety, encouraging themselves, and taking their emotional temperature. Oxford's classification of language learning strategies is more comprehensive and detailed compared with her earlier research. Nineteen secondary strategies and a further sixty-two specific strategies are included in the six broad strategies. Thus lay the fundamentals of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990).

Findings from Previous Studies

Language learning strategies play a vital role in the acquisition of second language skills. One of the key aspects of second language acquisition is speaking skills, as they allow students to express themselves and engage in social interactions with native speakers. Speaking is considered the most difficult of the four language skills to learn by the majority of second language learners. This is because, unlike reading or writing, speaking occurs in real-time, removing the opportunity for learners to edit and revise their speech (Nunan & Bailey, 2003). Language learning strategies have received a great deal of attention for their positive effects on language learning since the 1970s. Previous research has attempted to identify the strategies used by successful foreign language learners to teach the identified strategies to poor learners (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Rubin et al., 1982). To facilitate research on LLSs, Oxford (1990) designed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which is a self-report questionnaire that can be used to investigate the use of strategies by language learners in a variety of settings. According to Bayuon et al.(2019) in Adan and Hashim (2021), the proper techniques and strategies will aid learners in the process of language learning. Research after research has shown that it has a substantial impact in directing learners from unsuccessful to successful.

Good/Successful Language Learners

Most people are successful in learning their first language. The reason for this is that everyone can learn a language, and as they develop, they are immersed in a society where they must to some extent communicate using a language whose rules they are constantly taught. Due to differences in language learning abilities, some people are more successful than others at learning a second or foreign language. This discovery sparked the first studies on the traits of

successful language learners, which looked at good language learners (GLLs) from a variety of perspectives. According to Syafryadin, Martina, and Salniwati (2020), competent learners can intentionally use LLS with which they are familiar at every stage of the learning process. Good language learners possess strong motivation to learn and this in turn offers intrinsic motivation and enjoyment to learners (Norah & Daniel, 2021). Additionally, Yen and Mohamad (2021) asserted that successful language learners can assimilate effortlessly with their learning environment. This study is also supported by a writing by Yahya et. al (2021) which asserted that a good language learner is capable of strategizing learning whilst being creative and focused despite their learning environment. They could employ multiple approaches in learning typically when they speak and write in the language. As a result of this, there is a vital need to harness the pupils' individual characteristics, especially in being a good language learner to assist them in attaining the targeted language effectively within the time frame provided.

CEFR and Speaking Skills

The CEFR, or Common European Framework of Reference, was created by the Council of Europe to foster educational and cultural unity among its Member States (Council of Europe, 2001). According to Adila, et. al (2019), CEFR was implemented in Malaysia to help students learn the language they will use daily. It offers a general framework that outlines the skills that language learners must acquire to effectively use a foreign language in practice (Darmi et al., 2017). Furthermore, the CEFR focuses more on communication elements to improve learners' speaking abilities. By the time they complete their tertiary education, students will have mastered not just writing but also all four language skills. The learners' inability to communicate in English will no longer limit their future opportunities (Nii & Yunus, 2022). There are six level descriptors in the framework—also known as the CEFR "can do" statements for listening, speaking, reading, and writing—that provide users with detailed statements of what learners can do at each level. Based on the descriptors, language learners are classified into three major groups based on their language ability, with each group comprising two levels: Proficient users (levels C1 & C2), Independent users (levels B1 & B2), and Basic users (levels A1 & A2). The Malaysian Education Roadmap states that preschool students should earn an A1, primary students should earn an A2, secondary students should earn a B1 or B2, post-secondary students should earn a B2, and university students should graduate with a B2 or C1. The targets are set for Malaysian students to achieve as they progress through the English language program by 2025.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative research approach using the survey method. The questionnaire is adapted to suit the research questions and objectives of the study. The participants of the study were 30 Form 5 students who are currently taking arts as their electives at the secondary level. This survey research method would be able to gather data on how much the students use speaking learning strategies. The purpose of the study was to discover the preferred LLS among town area Form 5 Arts students in developing speaking skills; hence, this research methodology was particularly chosen since it was taught to best meet that purpose.

Research Instrument

This study utilised a modified version of the Oxford (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0 survey questionnaire to examine the frequency of second language learning strategies employed by participants. In LLS research, the SILL questionnaire is widely utilised due to its usability (Mizumoto, 2018). This questionnaire was simplified to accommodate the study's emphasis on speaking abilities. There are 36 statements from 6 parts in the questionnaire which looked at the LLS that related to Speaking skills for all six categories: Part A (Memory), Part B (Cognitive), Part C (Compensation), Part D (Metacognitive), Part E (Affective) and Part F (Social), comprising both direct and indirect strategies. Using a Likert scale, the participant's responses to the statements were quantified as follows: 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, and 5: Strongly Agree. The names of the students were omitted from the questionnaire to protect their privacy. In this study, the questionnaire was created using Google Form and then distributed using the WhatsApp application.

Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling technique was employed in this study. Thirty-three (33) Form 5 students enrolled in arts as electives for the Malaysia Examination Certificate were chosen from a top secondary school in the Tawau urban area. These students were specifically chosen to allow for a more detailed, comprehensive understanding of how art students employ LLS to speak. They have learned English as a second language since primary school. These students came from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some students are more financially able than others. These students are Malay, Chinese, and Bumiputera Sabah.

Findings and Discussion

All survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics, with mean scores and ranks used to determine the level of strategy utilisation. The results are tabulated in accordance with the research questions.

Table 1

Language Learning Strategies used by Form 5 Arts Students

Strategy Category		Mean Score	Rank
Direct Strategies	Memory	3.54	4
	Cognitive	3.55	3
	Compensation	3.34	6
Indirect Strategies	Metacognitive	3.90	1
	Affective	3.51	5
	Social	3.76	2

Table 1 displays the frequency (means ranging from 3.34 to 3.90) with which Form 5 Arts students employ language learning strategies. In addition, as shown in Table 1, metacognitive strategies were the most frequently employed ($M = 3.90$), followed by social strategies ($M = 3.76$), cognitive strategies ($M = 3.55$), memory strategies ($M = 3.54$), affective strategies ($M = 3.51$), and compensation strategies ($M = 3.34$).

Based on Table 1, it is indicated that metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used among the six categories. Similar findings were revealed by Hanafiah et al., (2021). Metacognitive strategies assist students to organise, evaluate, monitor, and plan their learning process (Oxford, 1990). Respondents showed their preferences as independent learners who are able to plan and self-assess their own performance. Learners who have control of their own learning will try to seek for different strategies to practise English. Table 1 also shows the least favourable strategy used by respondents in this study identified as the compensation strategy. The compensation learning strategies This can be seen at a low mean on item number twenty-four (24) in the questionnaire with 3.03, where respondents agreed with the statement that they read English without looking up every new word in their speech. Besides that, the respondents also implement guessing meanings of unfamiliar words. Apparently, most respondents responded that this strategy isn't suitable for them, and they need to refer to someone who has better language proficiency. Kehing and Melor (2021) see independent learners lead to good language learners which could also help low achievers to achieve better results (Wong et al., 2022).

Table 2a

Mean Score for each Metacognitive Strategy Item

Strategy	Item	Statement	Mean Score	Rank
Metacognitive	27	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English	3.81	6
	28	I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	3.90	3
	29	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	3.79	7
	30	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	4.09	1
	31	I look for people I can talk to in English.	3.82	5
	32	I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	3.88	4
	33	I think about my progress in learning English.	4.03	2

In-depth, table 2a displays that most respondents would agree to the seven statements that represent metacognitive strategies. The Metacognitive strategies are, 1) I try to find as many

ways as I can to use my English (M=3.81), 2) I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better (M=3.90), 3) I pay attention when someone is speaking English (M=3.79), 4) I try to find out how to be a better learner of English (M=4.09), 5) I look for people I can talk to in English (M=3.82), 6) I have clear goals for improving my English skills (M=3.88), and 7) I think about my progress in learning English (M=3.03). The findings prove that the respondents are greatly concerned about enhancing their language proficiency and metacognitive strategies are the most used strategies among the respondents involved. It implies their learning awareness and learning beliefs. They plan what to say and practise the way native speakers speak. They also think aloud and do self-reflection to become good language learners. Similar strategy preferences are consistent as the result of several related studies. Metacognitive strategies are preferable and most frequently used by language learners (Nurhidayah, 2017; Hanafiah et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2022).

Table 2b

Mean Score for each Compensation Strategy Item

Strategy	Item	Statement	Mean Score	Rank
Compensation	21	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	3.58	2
	22	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	3.21	4
	23	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	3.15	5
	24	I read English without looking up every new word.	3.03	6
	25	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	3.48	3
	26	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	3.68	1

Table 2b shows the least frequent strategy deployed by the respondents. With a mean score of 3.34, the compensation strategy which is also a direct strategy is the least favourable strategy among the respondents to improve their speaking skills. This can be seen in item number twenty-one (21) until twenty-six (26). The compensation strategies include six statements which are, (1) To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses (M=3.58), (2) When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures (M=3.21), (3) I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English (M=3.15), (4) I read English without looking up every new word (M=3.03), (5) I try to guess what the other person will say next in English (M=3.48), and (6) If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing (M=3.68). Item twenty-four (24) in the questionnaire with the statement they read English without looking up every new word has the lowest mean score which is 3.03. The respondents with poor speaking ability would probably try to avoid any conversation or

converse in English. Respondents who have limited vocabulary might also make up new words or use gestures to try to convey their messages. Respondents also predict the incoming words that might be used by another speaker for them to digest the meaning of words or the message conveyed. Hanafiah et al (2021) in Wong et al (2022) agree that students use compensation strategies, but not as frequently because they dig for words throughout a discussion and cannot easily transfer to their first language.

Table 3a

Students' use of language learning strategies according to gender

Students' Gender	Mean score
Male	3.54
Female	3.66

Table 3a shows that female students used more learning strategies than male students. According to several studies, female language learners employ more strategies than male learners (Oxford, 1990; Tam, 2013; Ho & Ng, 2016). The results of this study corroborate these findings. Female respondents dominated by applying more learning strategies to do their very best and use the speaking learning strategies to the fullest as good language learners. This symbolised that the respondents did their very best to adopt a suitable spelling learning style in improving their speaking skills. Hashim et al (2018) in their research revealed similar findings where good language learners will somehow realise their learning styles and try to experiment with various language learning strategies to find the one that suits them. The Male respondents chose fewer language learning skills compared to the female respondents with a mean score of 3.54. Speaking skills imply the ability to link the right language with the appropriate nonverbal clues is closely tied to social norms and practises, and many factors may have come into play in choosing a learning style. Nja et al (2019) agree students' prior knowledge may have influenced their choice because what students do not know or understand or have not been exposed to will not be accepted by the students. This strongly affirmed the speaking learning strategies research findings of different genders may vary.

Table 3b

The preferred strategies used by both male and female students

Gender	Strategy		Mean Score	Rank
Male	Direct Strategies	Memory	3.46	4
		Cognitive	3.50	3
		Compensation	3.32	6
	Indirect Strategies	Metacognitive	3.80	2
		Affective	3.42	5
		Social	3.81	1
Female	Direct Strategies	Memory	3.63	4
		Cognitive	3.65	3
		Compensation	3.35	6
	Indirect Strategies	Metacognitive	4.0	1
		Affective	3.60	5
		Social	3.71	2

The tabulated data in Table 3b shows the preferred direct strategies and indirect strategies applied by both genders in this study. Both male and female respondents agree with the use of indirect strategies as their preferred learning strategy. The metacognitive strategy (M=3.80), and the Social strategy (M=3.81) are the most preferred for male respondents. Likewise, the same indirect strategies, Metacognitive strategies (M=4.0) and Social strategies (M=3.71) are the most preferred learning strategies for female respondents. These learning styles have become the heart of respondents learning preferences who are aware of the needs and strategies that could maximize learning.

Implications and Conclusion

This research aimed to identify the most and least preferred language learning strategies (LLS) among Form 5 Arts students in enhancing their speaking skills. The data indicated that the students used both direct and indirect language learning strategies based on the mean scores M=3.90 and M=3.34. It was observed that both male and female students preferred indirect strategies, metacognitive strategies for female students, and social strategies for male

students, while compensation strategies in direct strategies were used the least by both genders. The findings of this study have significant implications for classroom instruction and reinforcement for more educators who are interested in conducting further research on language learning strategies. Aghaie and Zhang (2012) argued that the routine instruction of foreign languages should emphasize both the teaching of language content and the development of language learning strategies. Rubin et al (2007) proposed a model for strategy-based instruction that teachers could use for efficient strategy instruction. This model highlights four fundamental aspects of strategy instruction: increasing students' knowledge of the strategies, teachers' modelling of the strategies, ample practice opportunities for students, and prompting students to evaluate and transfer the strategies to new tasks. Moreover, teachers should be aware of the different learning preferences and styles of their students and employ a variety of strategies that cater to these preferences (Ma & Oxford, 2014).

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