

## Language Learning Strategies Used by Upper Secondary School Students for Reading Skills

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the most preferred and the least preferred Language Learning Strategies (LLS) among seventy-four (N=74) upper secondary school students for reading skills using a modified Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) model. Purposive sampling technique was employed in the study. An online structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data for the study. Descriptive statistics using frequency, mean and percentage was used to analyze the data collected. Results of the study show that the metacognitive strategies were the most preferred LLS while the compensation strategies were the least favoured. The findings imply that the students were very driven to explore strategies to improve their abilities to learn English as they looked for opportunities to read as much as possible in English. Therefore, the teachers of the students should encourage and guide them in using LLS to overcome any difficulties in their reading.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategies, Reading Skills, SILL, Upper Secondary School Students

### Introduction

Reading is a vital skill to acquire for intellectual and emotional growth. The main objective of reading is comprehension wherein readers reconstruct the mental world of the author (Nation, 2019; Zare, 2020). According to Pourhosein & Ahmadi (2011), the main goal of reading is to gain the correct message from a text that the writer intends for the readers to receive. It is therefore a fundamental cognitive process of learning which involves readers using their prior knowledge and their previous experiences to interact with written texts not only to construct meaningful meanings from the texts, but also to get and to understand messages or information contained in the texts (Pradani, 2021) using effective LLS. Reading competency can be achieved using LLS to decode words in print to give the words meanings (Nation, 2019). So, for students to perform well in their academic pursuit, using LLS is the basis for effective learning.

There is an absence of a reading culture among Malaysians. In Mohammed et al (2019); Sedik et al (2019); Alsaeedi et al (2021), the findings reveal that the reading habit rate among Malaysians is still at a low level. This is a far cry from the report released by the National Library Board of Singapore (2021) that stated 95% adults aged above 20 years old and teenagers (aged between 17 and 19) read more than once a week. On the other hand, Malaysians on average read only two books annually, and about 80% of Malaysian university students are reluctant readers. Similarly, Alsaeedi (2021) reports that students in the U.K. spend an average of 14.1 hours per week reading, and students in the U.S. spend an average of 4.94 hours per week reading. The poor reading culture among Malaysians is also expressed by Hema Letchamanan, a senior lecturer at Taylor's University School of Education, and Assistant Professor, Dr. Thanaseelen Rajasakran who lectures at University Tunku Abdul Rahman, both reported in The Star, 21 May 2023 titled '*Build a Nation of Readers*'. Although not a member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Malaysia participated in the latest 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) developed by OECD as a partner country. The assessment is to measure the reading literacy among 15-year-old students' reading performance in their ability to access and to retrieve information, to interpret and to integrate information, and to reflect and to evaluate information through five types of texts: narration, exposition, argumentation, description, and instruction (OECD, 2023).

From the PISA 2018 results, Malaysian students scored 415 points which was way below the OECD average of 487 points in reading assessment (OECD, 2023). This is translated into 54% of students attaining at least Level 2 proficiency in reading out of a possible seven levels, which means to say that they can identify the main ideas in a text of moderate length, can find information based on explicit criteria, and can reflect on the purpose and form of texts. The OECD report indicated that Malaysia ranked much lower than her ASEAN counterparts, Singapore and Thailand. There are many studies that show how LLS could enhance reading skills (Almutairi, 2018; Habok & Magyat, 2019; Amin, 2019; Baba & Affendi, 2020; Banditvilai, 2020; Valizadeh, 2021). Therefore, teachers should provide clear instruction to students on the use of LLS in their reading. As the students become more knowledgeable at using LLS, they ultimately become more confident and more independent readers. Therefore, it is vital that the students be exposed to the different LLS available.

According to Jeevaratnam & Stapa (2020), although students may be able to read the whole text, they may not understand or recall what they have read without employing proper reading skills. Similarly, Jane, et al (2020) finds that most of the students demonstrate moderate understanding of texts and are able to integrate only some parts of the texts to infer meanings. Par (2020) studies the relationship between the use of reading strategies and reading achievement among EFL students in Indonesia. The study suggests that the more students make use of reading strategies, the better their understanding of the text they have read.

Reading is not just recognising the words in the text. Just like in Jeevaratnam & Stapa (2020); Nurmalasari & Haryudin (2021) find that students have difficulties in reading as they do not understand the meaning of the text. The students only focus on some words which they are familiar with. Ideally, students should be able to distinguish between essential and non-essential information; to access and to retrieve information; to interpret and to integrate information; and to reflect and to evaluate information through various types of texts (OECD, 2023). The problem arises when students are unable to perform the tasks recommended in the OECD 2023 report on the reading skills of Malaysian students. Therefore, this study aims

to identify the most preferred and the least preferred LLS employed by the upper secondary school students so that appropriate measures can be taken to enhance the reading skills of the students.

### **Esl In Malaysian Secondary Education**

Isyaku et al (2021) explain that the education system in Malaysia is structured into several levels, including primary, secondary, and tertiary education. In Malaysia, English as a Second Language (ESL) education plays a crucial role in developing students' language proficiency, including reading skills. Secondary education in Malaysia typically covers a four- or five-year period, depending on the school system. Students usually enter secondary school at the age of 13 or 14 and complete their studies by the age of 17 or 18. Baba & Affendi (2020) explain that the curriculum in secondary schools is designed to provide a comprehensive education that prepares students for further studies or entry into the workforce. According to Lai (2021), the researcher perceives that the medium of instruction in Malaysian secondary schools varies based on the type of school. National schools predominantly use Bahasa Malaysia (the national language) as the medium of instruction for most subjects. However, English is taught as a compulsory subject in national schools, with an emphasis on developing English language proficiency among students.

Additionally, English is taught as a second language in secondary schools across Malaysia. ESL education aims to develop students' proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in English. The curriculum focuses on building vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and communication abilities to enable students to use English effectively in various contexts. The Malaysian Ministry of Education prescribes the English language syllabus for secondary schools (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012). The syllabus provides a framework for teaching and learning English, outlining the specific language skills, topics, and language functions to be covered at each level. It includes components such as language systems (grammar, vocabulary), language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), and language use (functional language) (Baba & Affendi, 2020; Schaar et al., 2013). Lee & Wong (2017) note that assessment of English proficiency in secondary schools is conducted through various means, including written examinations, coursework, and speaking assessments. National examinations, such as the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), assess students' English language proficiency and determine their eligibility for further studies or entry into higher education institutions.

### **Definitions Of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)**

LLS, as defined by Wenden (1987); Wenden & Rueben (1987), encompasses various aspects of language learning. It involves acquiring and managing the meaning of a second or foreign language, incorporating cognitive theory and the learner's strategic understanding of language learning, as well as considering the emotional perspective, including motivation and attitude. Additionally, Wenden & Rueben (1987) describe LLS as any procedures, plans, stages, or routines employed by learners to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and application of knowledge.

According to Willing (1988), LLS enable learners to transform external input into internal and personal resources and abilities. By consciously choosing and utilizing language-specific knowledge through processes like storing, retrieving, and applying this knowledge, learners engage in activities that enhance their study or use of a second or foreign language. Similarly, Rigney & Rubin (1987) agree that LLS encompass actions, procedures, or methods employed

by language learners to facilitate language acquisition. Richards et al (1992) also concur that LLS involve intentional actions and thoughts used to comprehend, acquire, or recall new information.

Chamot (2005) categorizes LLS into three primary groups: metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective. These areas involve planning, reflecting on the learning process, monitoring comprehension or output, and evaluating learning outcomes. They represent unique ideas or actions that aid in comprehending, acquiring, or retaining new knowledge. Nonetheless, the foremost advocate of LLS, Oxford (1989 & 1990), states that LLS are activities employed by learners to simplify, expedite, enhance enjoyment, become more self-directed, improve effectiveness, and make language acquisition more portable. These encompass cognitive, emotional, and social components of language learning processes that enhance learners' competency and self-confidence.

### **LLS In ESL Reading Skills**

Reading is a cognitive process where the reader engages in a mental exchange with the author through written text. Scholars like Zare (2020) emphasize the significance of reading strategies in cognitive psychology, as they are vital for achieving effective comprehension. According to Cohen (1990), reading strategies pertain to intentional cognitive processes employed by readers to enhance their reading performance. Baker and Boonkit (2004) define reading strategies as various techniques used by readers to ensure successful comprehension of a given text.

Moreover, Janzen (2013) describes reading strategies as systematic approaches and actions used to overcome comprehension challenges while reading. These strategies can vary, ranging from foundational methods to more comprehensive ones, or from higher-level strategies to more detailed ones. Zare (2020) elaborates that bottom-up strategies involve utilizing information from the text itself, analyzing words, sentences, or consulting a dictionary for unfamiliar words. On the other hand, top-down approaches involve drawing on prior knowledge and connecting it with the text to aid comprehension (Janzen 2013). Additional tactics include assessing, inquiring, verifying, forecasting, synthesizing, restating, and interpreting. Overall, reading strategies are essential for facilitating the reading process and providing learners with explicit guidance to comprehend written texts, especially in the context of second language acquisition.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Methodology**

A quantitative method using a survey research design was employed for this study. Since the study's objective is to determine the most preferred language-learning strategies among upper secondary school students, hence the use of a survey is appropriate. 74 form four students who learn English as a second language in the school were selected using purposive sampling.

#### **Research Design**

This study was conducted quantitatively to identify the most preferred language learning strategies in reading among the upper secondary school students and to identify the least preferred language learning strategies in reading among upper secondary school students. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was employed in this study to determine the reading strategies used.

### Research Instrument

An online structured questionnaire was chosen as the research instrument for this study. In order to explore the most preferred language learning strategies among the upper secondary school students, the researchers used the research instrument to elicit in-depth data (Warid Mihat, 2015). There are 5 parts in the list of questions. Part A consists of Direct Strategies: Memory Strategies; Part B consists of Direct strategies: Cognitive strategies; Part C consists of Direct Strategies: Compensation Strategies; Part D consists of Indirect Strategies: Metacognitive Strategies; Part E consists of Indirect Strategies: Affective Strategies and last but not least Part F consists of Indirect Strategies: Social Strategies.

### Data Collection Procedure

An online structured questionnaire was created in order to collect data to ascertain the reading strategies employed by the sample of respondents. The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). SILL contains 80 learning strategy items that are then divided into six parts, including Cognitive, Metacognitive, Memory, Compensation, Affective, and Social. However, amendments were made to the questionnaire to ensure it is simpler with only 16 items. In addition, only items relating to reading skills were chosen from the customized questionnaire in order to determine the reading strategies used. The questionnaire was distributed to the respondents by the researchers, and they had plenty of time to respond.

### Data Analysis

A Likert scale, rating from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree", is used to allocate scores for each item. After all the respondents have answered the survey, descriptive statistics using frequency, mean and percentage was used to analyze the data collected. Then, the data are tabulated based on the six parts of the language learning strategies according to the adapted questionnaire.

### Findings And Discussion

Table 1 presents the data on the memory strategies employed by the students.

Table 1

#### *Memory strategies employed by the students*

Strategies	Percentage (%)
I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English	92%
I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	86.5%
I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them	94.6%
I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign	79.8%

Based on Table 1, for memory strategies, 94.6% of the participants use new English words in a sentence in order to memorize the words. When the participants use the new English words in a sentence, it could increase their understanding of the meaning of the words and the context it is being used. The strategy of remembering new English words or phrases by

remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign is not favored by them as only 79.8% prefer the strategy.

Table 2

*Cognitive strategies employed by the students*

Strategies	Percentage (%)
I read for pleasure in English.	94.5%
I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully	93.3%
I try not to translate word-for-word.	76.7%
I make summaries of information that I read in English.	82.2%

In Table 2, 94.5% read for pleasure in English for the cognitive strategies. Reading for pleasure could increase their exposure towards the English language. As a result, various language skills could be developed such as vocabulary, grammar and reading skills. However, certain students prefer to skim an English passage first, and they will read the text again after that. The least strategy used by the participants in the cognitive strategies is trying not to translate word-for-word. Translating word-for-word might not be helpful in understanding a sentence as misunderstanding could arise if only one word meaning is put into account (Jennie et al 2022).

Table 3

*Compensation strategies employed by the students*

Strategies	Percentage (%)
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	87.8%
I read English without looking up every new word.	55.5%

Table 3 shows that for compensation strategies, the participants prefer to understand English words by making guesses. Looking up every new word makes it practically impossible for them to read, and if they continue to do so, it will affect their motivation to read in English. Hence, the most common strategy for the participants is to guess the meaning of the unfamiliar English words (87.8%). Hui et al (2022) stated that language learners can skillfully infer the meaning of a word by using the surrounding words as linguistic and non-linguistic cues. As a result, it indirectly trains the learners to be responsible in their own reading process.

Table 4

*The metacognitive strategies employed by the students*

Strategies	Percentage (%)
I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English	90.5%
I have clear goals for improving my English skills	94.5%

In Table 4, 94.5% of the participants have clear goals for improving their English skills. This demonstrates that the students are very driven and eager to explore strategies to improve their abilities to learn English. For this reason, 90.5% of them look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English. As they read more English materials, their language skills become better, and they might eventually achieve their goals in language learning.

Table 5

*The affective strategies employed by the students*

Strategies	Percentage (%)
I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	71.7%
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	77%

Based on Table 5, a total of 77% of the participants used the strategy of talking to someone else about the feeling of learning English while 71.7% reward themselves when they do well in English. Language learning can be challenging, and some learners may experience anxiety or fear of making mistakes. Hence, the affective strategies applied by the participants can help learners manage anxiety, promote a more relaxed state of mind, and create a supportive learning environment.

Table 6

*Social strategies employed by the students*

Strategies	Percentage (%)
I ask for help from English speakers.	91.9%
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	90.2%

Based on Table 6, 91.9% of the participants ask for help from English speakers. The world nowadays has become borderless with the existence of technology. Hence, it is possible for the learners to ask for help from English speakers as they are very expert in the use of various gadgets. The technology advancement allows the learners to communicate with English speakers easily. Therefore, asking for help from English speakers and trying to learn about the culture of English speakers could develop more interest in learning the language. As a result, the motivation of learning the language increases and learners could be successful in language learning.

The findings of the study clearly shows that the students used various language learning strategies in order to improve their reading skills. Based on the findings, the most preferred language learning strategy for the students' reading skill is metacognitive strategy. The findings are similar to the study conducted by Jennie et al (2022) on the practice of language learning strategies in reading among lower secondary school students.

### **Conclusion**

This study aims to identify the most preferred and the least preferred LLS employed by the upper secondary school students so that appropriate measures can be taken to enhance the reading skills of the students. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights to the three primary stakeholders: students, educators, and the Ministry of Education. For students, it serves as an enlightening approach on the most preferred LLS method to apply in ESL classroom. For educators, by teaching LLS to ESL students, educators empower them to take control of their learning process. Learners become more independent and self-directed, allowing them to actively engage in their language development and take responsibility for their progress.

While LLS could be beneficial for language learners, they also have certain setbacks and pedagogical limitations that educators and learners should be aware of. LLS effectiveness could vary significantly based on individual learning styles, preferences, and aptitudes. What works well for one learner may not work as effectively for another. Novice learners, especially those who are new to a language, may struggle to effectively employ LLS due to their limited language proficiency. They might not have the necessary language knowledge and metacognitive skills to utilize the strategies optimally. The findings of this study aim to contribute valuable insights and draw attention of the preferable approach of LLS for students to employ to improve their language proficiency. The study's findings clearly demonstrate that students employed diverse language learning strategies to enhance their reading skills. According to the results, the most favored strategy among students for improving their reading abilities is the metacognitive strategy.

In summary, the study's findings are expected to provide foundation for increasing awareness on LLS in ESL classroom. Furthermore, this study is hoped to have significant implication for the best strategies to be applied for language learners within the ESL community.

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