



The Usage of Language Learning Strategies in Malaysian Private Secondary Schools

Bathuma Subramaniam
University Putra Malaysia
E-mail: priya_keys@yahoo.com

Kalaimakal Palanisamy
University Putra Malaysia

Doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.5n.4p.96

Received: 20/05/2014

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.5n.4p.96>

Accepted: 02/07/2014

Abstract

This study explores the usage of language learning strategies in private secondary Schools in Malaysia. Hypothesis was made that most of the students do not practice the language learning strategies completely and accurately. The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship between language learning strategies and practices of the students of private school. Survey Instruments included the dependent and independent variables of gender, age, form and level. About 60 students (n= 60) responded to a survey instrument. Likert scale was used as data collection strategies. Quantitative data analyzed quantitatively through SPSS. The convenience sampling technique was used to collect data because of the time and cost constraints. Participants were the students of 5 different forms. The instrument used in the study contained 50 items with closed ended responses which was previously pilot tested with many other reviewers to establish content validity. Survey information was obtained through the use of questionnaire and all responses remained confidential. Generally, the survey results indicate that students did not use language learning strategies regularly and completely. Most of the students have to face difficulties due to lack of practices of language learning strategies.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, ESL students, Malaysian secondary school

1. Introduction

English is an important second language (L2) which is widely spoken and used in Malaysia. The Ministry of Education, Malaysia has recognized English language as a compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools. Therefore it is essential to investigate the language learning strategies of ESL students in Malaysia to analyze the process of language learning and to examine how it affects language development, to be able to assist students in learning the English language (Mohamed Amin 2000).

2. Literature Review

Language learning strategies are among the main factors that help determine how well –students learn a second language. A second language is a language studied in a setting where that language is the main vehicle of everyday communication and where abundant input exists in that language. Here's a brief historical note on the study of second language learners' strategies. As our knowledge of second language acquisition increased markedly during the 1970s, teachers and researchers came to realize that no single research finding and no single method of language teaching would usher in an era of universal success in teaching a second language. Hence, language learning strategies have been a focus of research for many years now.

Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p.63). When the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style and the second language task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning.

According to Brown (2000) strategies are those specific "attacks" that we make on a given problem, and that vary considerably within each individual. They are moment-by-moment techniques that we employ to solve "problems" posed by second language input and output. Chamot (2005, p.112) defines strategies quite broadly as "procedures that facilitate a learning task. Strategies are most often conscious and goal driven."

Brown (2000) indicated that O'Malley and Chamot (1990) introduced strategies that were divided into three main categories. Firstly, metacognitive is a term used in information-processing theory to indicate an "executive function, strategies that involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed (Purpura, 1997). Cognitive

strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Socioaffective strategies have to do with social-mediating activity and interacting with others.

Developing skills in these areas can help the language learner build up learner independence and autonomy whereby students can take control their own learning.

The study will address the following research questions:

- 1) Is there any significant difference between male and female in using language learning strategies?
- 2) What type of strategy categories are used most frequently and less frequently by ESL students in secondary education?
- 3) Is there any significant difference between lower secondary and upper secondary students in applying language learning strategies?

3. Methods

This research investigates learning strategy use among ESL students of secondary education in Malaysia by adopting survey method. This section describes the participants of the study and the instrument used to collect the data.

3.1 Participants

Sixty students studying in Sekolah Menengah Stella Maris participated in this study. Both male (45%) and female (55%) students were selected randomly from Form 1 to Form 3 (lower secondary) and Form 4 to Form 5 (upper secondary).

3.2 Instrument

The data collection instrument used in this study was a self-reported inventory; Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (ESL/EFL Version) designed by Oxford (1990) which measures the participants' frequency of the strategy usage for L2 learning. The SILL consist of 50-question, which includes six categories; cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social. The SILL has gone through significant revisions with numerous evaluations of reliability and validity (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Every category measures one type of strategy in particular. According to Ellis (1994), Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies is the most comprehensive classification.

4. Data Analysis Procedure

About 60 students (n= 60) responded to a survey instrument. Likert scale was used as data collection strategies. The convenience sampling technique was used to collect data because of the time and cost constraints. Participants were informed that their personal information revealed would be strictly for research purpose and therefore, confidentiality would be completely protected. Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS, version 19.0) for Microsoft Windows was used to analyze the collected data. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages) were performed in order to gather the demographic data of the participants and to calculate their overall strategy use. In addition, independent t-tests were performed to figure out whether there are significant differences in strategy use between different genders plus lower secondary students and upper secondary students.

5. Results

A total of 60 students were randomly selected as a sample, of which 27 (45%) were male and 33 (55%) female. Majority of the respondents were from form 2 (28.3%) and minority of the respondents were from form 5 (15%). This information showed clearly in Table1 and Table 1.1.

Table 1. Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	male	27	45.0	45.0	45.0
	female	33	55.0	55.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.1 Educational level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	13	21.7	21.7	21.7
	2	17	28.3	28.3	50.0
	3	10	16.7	16.7	66.7
	4	11	18.3	18.3	85.0
	5	9	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows the reliability of the analysis obtained through the Cronbach's alpha coefficient test. The analysis shows an excellent reliability of .949.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
.949	50

5.1 Statistical analysis

Some data were subjected to descriptive statistics. The results are presented in Table 3. The results reveal that there is no significant difference between the three major categories of language learning strategies (Metacognitive strategies, Cognitive strategies and Socioaffective strategies) by both male and female students. However, the students use compensation strategies which showed the high mean 3.21 and all other categories fell within a medium strategy use level. The next high frequently used strategies, after compensation was cognitive strategies with the mean of 3.12. The means of Metacognitive strategies, Memory strategies and Social strategies were relatively the same (2.98, 2.92 and 2.98, respectively). Then least frequently used strategy was Affective strategies with the mean of 2.73.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
CA	60	1.22	4.33	2.9185	.83796
CB	60	1.57	4.50	3.1274	.63140
CC	60	1.17	4.83	3.2139	.84377
CD	60	1.00	4.22	2.9759	.89173
CE	60	1.00	4.50	2.7333	1.10818
CF	60	1.00	4.50	2.9750	.92100

CA = Memory strategies

CB= Cognitive strategies

CC= Compensation strategies

CD= Metacognitive strategies

CE= Affective strategies

CF= Social strategies

Table 4 and Table 4.1 show the difference between male and female students applying language learning strategies by using T-Test. The results confirm that, there is no considerable (mean 2.97 for male students while 2.92 for female students) difference between male and female students in applying language learning strategies.

Table 4. Group Statistics (T-Test)

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
overall	male	27	2.9667	.70464	.13561
	female	33	2.9200	.66110	.11508

Table 4.1 Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.325	.571	.26	58	.793	.04667	.17671	-.30706	.40039
Equal variances not assumed			.26	54.12	.794	.04667	.17786	-.30990	.40323

Table 5 and Table 5.1 prove the difference between lower secondary students and upper secondary students in applying language learning strategies. The T-Test results disclose that, there is no noticeable difference between lower secondary students and upper secondary students in utilizing language learning strategies.

Table 5. Group Statistics

	level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
overall	lower	39	2.9185	.67959	.10882
	upper	20	2.9930	.69879	.15625

Table 5.1 Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.047	.830	-.395	57	.694	-.07454	.18868	-.45237	.30329
Equal variances not assumed			-.391	37.491	.698	-.07454	.19041	-.46018	.31111

6. Discussion

The result has pointed out that for these learners; they have shown the high use of overall LLSs and medium to high use for all the subcategories of LLSs in language learning. This outcome is dependable with previous studies, that more proficient language learners use more LLSs in language learning (e.g., Altan, 2003; Bruen, 2001; Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Green & Oxford, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Rubin, 1975, 1981). For these students, their high use of Compensation strategies implies that they have bigger pool of lexis which can help them guess intelligently in reading and listening and convey their intended meaning in speaking and writing. These strategies make up for the deficiency in grammar and vocabulary. When learners do not know new words and expressions, they guess the meaning. A learner brings own life experience to interpret data by guessing. Compensation strategies are also used in production when grammatical knowledge is incomplete. When a learner does not know the subjunctive form of verb, a different form may be used to convey the message.

It should also be noted that these secondary school learners reported high use of cognitive strategies. It suggests that they not only know how to guess the words smartly in the task (compensation strategy) but they know what they should do to improve their English subskills (cognitive strategies). The tools of receiving and sending messages are used when learners try to find the main idea through skimming and scanning. It is not necessary to check every word. The teenage learners commonly use analyzing and reasoning strategies. These are used to understand the meaning and expression of the target language and to make new expressions.

From the results of independent t-tests, they showed that gender and currently enrolled form (level) do not result in significant differences in the use of LLSs for these learners. In terms of gender difference, the result of the current study is not consistent with many previous findings which indicated females used more LLSs than males (e.g., Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1993). It could possibly be explained that for these learners, their strategy use was no longer constrained by this fundamental gender differences. However, caution should be made

before drawing definite generalization because of the limited size and unbalanced number of participants (female= 33, male= 27) in this study.

In terms of different levels of enrolled form, the result does not show significant difference between lower secondary and upper secondary students. It could possibly be interpreted that once learners' language proficiency reached a certain level; their pattern of strategy use would tend to be more or less stabilized. However, due to the limited and uneven number of participants in two groups (number of lower secondary students= 39, number of upper secondary students= 21), any generalization here can only be drawn tentatively and more research is needed for further clarification.

7. Conclusion and Implications

It is clear that the learners in this study have engaged a variety of learning strategies in learning English. Particularly, their high use of compensation and cognitive strategies has enabled them to become efficient second language learners. This also indicates that, good command of knowledge to make intelligent guesses in facilitating their comprehension of the language. Next, use of metacognitive strategies has allowed them to become competent ESL learners in planning, organizing, monitoring, evaluating and orchestrating different strategies for different language tasks. According to Cem Alptekin (2007), the learners make use of all types of learning strategies irrespective of the learning context, compensation as a direct learning strategy seems to be the one most frequently deployed in both tutored and naturalistic learning.

In terms of differences with regard to gender and different levels of form, this study has not found any of these factors significantly evoke different strategy use among these learners. Implications could be that, for these learners, their language learning strategies were no longer constrained by the fundamental gender differences, and their strategy use tended to be more or less stabilized once a certain level of proficiency was reached. Also, it has given a very positive connotation in that one can still become a proficient and ESL learner in Malaysia when they are equipped with effective language learning strategies.

Finally, it has become clear that these learners have developed skill-specific strategies and they would apply these strategies to different English tasks in an integrated manner. For these learners, the commonality comes from their sensitivity and attentiveness for different English patterns, expressions, and usages in reading and listening. In addition, they would actively create output channels to put these internalized knowledge in use by engaging in different modes of spoken and written practices. Through constant self-monitoring and evaluating their perceptive and productive product, their internalization process is reinforced and consequently their language proficiency is further enhanced.

Drawing on the identified characteristics of these learners in this study, language instructors can help students by explicitly teaching and modelling the cognitive strategies matched with the learning tasks in the language classroom. Due to the limited scale of this study- small sample size and homogeneity of participants, any definite generalization may be premature at this stage. Future research involving more and a wider range of private secondary school learners should be conducted to further testify the language learning strategies recognized in the present study. Once these strategies can be validated, more effective strategy training program can be developed to benefit more ESL learners in Malaysia.

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