Language Learning Strategies used by Adult Learners of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)

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Abstract

Although, a lot has been said about the good language learners, not much is known about the adult learners and the strategies they use in order to further improve and acquire their second language learning skills. Thus, this study aims to identify language learning strategies employed by successful language learner among adult learners of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) students for improving their five main skills which include writing, reading, listening, speaking, vocabulary and grammar. This study employed a mixed-method research design where survey and semi-structured interview were conducted in collecting the data. Ten students were selected using purposive sampling technique. The questionnaire for the survey was adopted from Andrew D. Cohen and Julie C. Chi's Language Strategy Use Inventory Semi structured interview was also done for triangulation. Based on the findings, it has been identified that learners use language learning strategies in order to become good language learners. The respondents have pretty much the same preferences in using the language learning strategies. However, although different learners preferred different language learning strategies, there are some strategies that are leading among good language learners. All of the respondents tend to make use of all three categories of language learning strategies which are cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio affective. They tend to use different categories of language learning strategies for different skills that they would to acquire and enhance on.

Keywords: language learning strategies, English as a Second Language (ESL), adult learners.

Introduction

Learning a language is quite of a complex process and learning a language takes more time than expected. Learners learn language through time language learning is to be defined as the process which the language capability develops in an individual. It takes strategies, steps, and routines to learn a language. According to Wenden and Rubin (1987), learning strategies can be defined as actions, steps, plans or routines taken by the learners in processing the information they received. Chamot & Kupper (1989) and O'Malley & Chamot (1990) also acknowledge that language learning strategies are specific thoughts and actions to maximise learning process the comprehension of the new input and information. Researchers have observed that various learners approach learning in quite of a different manner, thus the concept of 'learning styles' has been used to refer to those differences (Cohen, 2010). Different learns have different learning styles and different strategies preferences in order for them to further acquire and develop their language learning. Indeed, what suits one learner may be inadequate for another. In addition to developing students' communicative competence, Lessard (1997) in his paper mentioned on how language learning strategies (LLS) are important because research suggest that training students with language learning strategies can help them to be become better language learners. A study by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) also suggests that effective second language or foreign language learners are aware of the language learning strategies they use and why they use them.

For many people, learning a second language is one of the most important tasks they need to accomplish. As in Malaysia, English is to be considered as the second language as English language is used not only in primary and secondary level of education, but also in tertiary level of education. English language is divided into a few skills that a learner should acquire in order for them to fully acquire the language. The skills mentioned are listening, speaking, reading, writing and also the skills of mastering vocabulary and grammar of English language. Being a TESL students, the pressure of being able to acquire English language is highly crucial and important. Thus, many researches have contributed to the list of many influence and factors that can contribute to the success of language learning. Many researchers have done their research on language learning strategies. Without learners realising it, there are possibility that all language learners have their own preferences of strategy that they do out of routine in language learning process. However, there are also learners who realise their learning styles preference and able to identify the strategies they use to master a second language learning process. This leads to the fact that one of the areas of research in language learning strategies is on the good language learners. It is to be said that good language learners tend to use language learning strategies in acquiring and enhancing their second language acquisition. Good language learners will somehow realise their learning styles and try to experiment with various language learning strategies in order to find the one that suits them.

Although, a lot has been said about the good language learners (eg; Naiman, 1975, Mohammed Amin Embi, 1996;2000), not much is known about the good language learners among the adult learners and the strategies they tend to use in order to further improve and acquire their second language learning skills. As English language is to be considered as crucial in today's world, hence, there is a need of a study to identify strategies used by adult learners especially among TESL students in improving their English language skills.

Literature Review

Learning a language takes time and it is quite of a complex process for learners to acquire the language successfully. In order to acquire a new language, especially a second language, learners should be able to come up with a plan or strategy for the to learn and acquire the language easily. The fact of learning a language is not all about cramming in information, but instead, learning a language is about learning by doing. Thus, many researchers have come up with research and studies on language learning strategies. The language learning strategies are not newly created strategies as these have been in use by ancient storytellers since thousands of years ago. Learning strategies, according to Chamot, (2005); O'Malley and Chamot, (1990), are specific mental and communicative procedures that learners employ in order to learn and use language. Wong and Nunan (2011) mentioned in their study on how there are beliefs that such focus which includes strategies make learners to become more effective and become more learner centred. They also quoted Macaro (2001) on awareness and deployment of strategies will lead to more effective language acquisition as one of the hypotheses tested by learning strategy researchers. Exposure to learning strategies somehow tend to cause learners to be more proactive in contributing to enhance the effectiveness of their own learning. There are many definitions from many researchers on what is meant by language learning strategies, however, it can be seen that the various definitions from various researchers evolves pretty much around the same fundamental and essence which language learning strategies is defined as steps, actions, techniques, approaches and procedures to further gain understanding on certain information in learning a language. The strategies are also used to help learners to be able to acquire the language learning easier depending on the learners' learning style and preferences. As learning styles are different among each individual, thus the strategies used by each learner will also tend to be different according to their learning styles preferences. According to the work of O'Malley et al (1985), learning strategies are always defined and categorised in three areas. The first area or category is metacognitive strategies that deal with the ability to control the process of learning and the awareness of the learning process takes place. The second area or category is cognitive strategy that relates to more memorisation and integration. Cognitive strategy is usually involving learners trying to compute and understand certain information given to them. Socio-affective strategy is to be said as another area or category of learning strategies. Socio-affective strategy includes the actual use of the language.

On another note, language learning strategies are always associated with good language learners. Many researchers have grown interest in looking at the concept of good language learner. It is proven by many

researchers that good language learners will always use language learning strategies in order for them to be able to acquire the language. Good language learners are usually aware of the strategies they prefer depending on their learning styles preferences. Sewell (2003) also mentioned on how many researchers try to define and characterize what language learners are and it is stated by many researchers on how the students' goals should also be considered and looked into. The reason for that is because it may be easier to suggest that someone who has learned to read, write, speak and listen effectively in English language proficiently in a short time is a good language learner, however, it is unclear whether a learner who has only learned one or two skills mentioned earlier is also to be considered as a good language learner.

As for this context of study, research has shown that language proficiency or achievement is related to language learning strategies (Oxford, 1989). Good language learners are to be considered as the learners who are able to communicate in English language fluently and able to use the language proficiently. In reference to a study by Su (2005), it is stated how research has shown that language learners generally use proper learning strategies, and the use of language learning strategies does help their learning results. All language learners use certain types of language learning strategies but there are differences in the frequency and choice of strategies. In a study done by Chamot and Kupper (1989), they found that all ability students used language learning strategies, however, what differentiated the effective language learners and less effective language learners are the range of strategies, also the way the strategies are used. Effective or good language learners used strategies more appropriately, with variety and in ways that helped them to complete the task successfully (Su, 2005).

In another related study done towards an insight towards good language learners and their strategies by Tigarajan et al. (2016), they have identified and concluded that learners use various language learning strategies in order to become a good language learner and some strategies are outstanding although different learners preferred different language learning strategies. This is parallel to the findings of a research by Fangyuan Du (2018), where the researcher has done a study on investigating and examines the differences in listening strategy use of successful and unsuccessful EFL Chinese university students for diverse listening question types. The study has indicated that listening strategy used is highly individualized as the strategies they employed depends on their linguistic level knowledge.

Methodology

This study is a quantitative study that involved 10 samples of students from the population of TESL degree students of University of Malaya as the respondents of this study. The sampling technique used for this study is a purposive sampling. A semi-structured questionnaire was constructed in order to identify the strategies used by the sample of respondents. The questionnaire was adopted from Andrew D. Cohen and Julie C. Chi's Language Strategy Use Inventory and the questionnaire was adopted to a simpler version of questionnaire where respondents only need to choose the strategies they use rather than to scale they strategies they use. The purpose of the questionnaire to be adopted is to ensure respondents do not get confused by the amount of strategies options listed in the questionnaire as some might not be related to them. The questionnaire was then distributed to the respondents and the respondents were given some time to answer the questions. The data collected then analysed with descriptive statistic using frequency and percentage counts.

Findings and discussion

Strategies for improving Writing Skills

Strategy	Percentage
Plan out in advance on how to write academic papers	60%

Try writing different kind of texts in English language	60%
Take notes on writing essay strategies	60%
Find a different way to express the idea (eg; synonyms, proverbs, etc)	70%
Review what I have written before continue writing	60%
Use reference materials (eg; glossary, dictionary; thesaurus etc)	60%
Revise my writing once or twice to improve the language and content	60%
Try to get feedbacks from others on my writing	60%

Table 1

Based from the result of the questionnaire, 70% of the respondents prefer to use the strategy of using different ways such as including proverbs, synonyms and etc to express the idea in their writing. The respondents pointed out that the use of proverbs, synonyms and etc helps them to convey messages in a different ways and styles of writing. It also helps learners in bringing different perspectives in their writing through different use of vocabulary and word play, quoting one of the interviewees saying *"the use of proverbs, synonyms and etc in improving writing skills sharpens one's ability to critically and creatively write as to convey their ideas, thoughts and messages".* When respondents are asked on their strategies of learning and acquiring synonyms, proverbs, etc, they mentioned that they read a lot and also through mass media. The other strategies mentioned in the questionnaire including the strategy of planning out in advance how to write academic papers, use reference materials and etc. The same frequency of 60% for each of the rest of the strategies mentioned in the questionnaire.

Strategies for improving Reading Skills

Strategy	Percentage
Read as much as possible in English language	70%
Try to find things to read for pleasure in English language	70%
Skimming and scanning the text first only then re-read for further understanding	40%

Pay attention to the organisation of the text; headings and subheadings	60%
Guess the meaning of some individual words using clues from the context	90%
Use a dictionary to get detailed sense of what individual word means	60%

Table 2

The data gained from the questionnaire have shown that a number of 90% of respondents use the strategy of guessing the meaning of some individual words that they do not understand as their strategy to improve reading. During reading, when they encounter certain words that they do not understand, they will try to make smart guesses of the meaning of the words that suit the context of their reading. Learners believe that guessing the meaning of some individual words using clues from the context is helpful for their reading. The respondents are also asked on their strategy in guessing the meaning of some words that they are not familiar with. Some mentioned that they apply the strategy of skimming and scanning and also by looking at the context of sentence itself. However, one respondent highlighted that in just guessing the meaning of words, it is very important that the learners to have acquired a basic level of knowledge and understanding of the majority words present throughout the context or else they might be exposed to misunderstood the whole meaning of the context. The respondents are also asked on their opinion and preferences on whether they find it more convenient and effective to guess the meaning of the words from the context or to just open up dictionaries. Varieties of responses received as different learner prefers different strategy, however, quoting one of the respondents saying that *"It depends. Getting meaning from context may resolve to wider understanding of the whole context whereas getting meaning from dictionaries is more specific to understanding the word alone".* The next preferred strategies which has the percentage of 70% for reading strategies are the strategy of to read as much as possible in English language and try to find things to read for pleasure in English language.

Strategies for improving Listening and Speaking Skills

Strategy	Percentage
Listen to talk shows on the radio, watch TV shows or see movies in English language.	100%
Listen to the conversation of other people who communicate in English language and try to get the gist of it.	60%
Imitate the way native speakers talk.	70%
Pay special attention to the pronunciation of certain words.	30%

Try to understand what I hear without translating it word-for-word.	80%
Focus on the context of what people are saying.	60%
Ask the speakers to repeat, slow down and clarification if I don't understand anything.	80%
Make educated guesses about the topic based on what has already been said.	10%

Table 3

Strategy	Percentage
Practice saying new expressions to myself.	60%
Regularly seek out opportunities to talk with native speakers.	40%
Plan out in advance on what I want to say.	100%
Get involved in conversation using English language.	80%
Encourage others to correct errors in my speaking.	40%
Use code switching if I don't know how to convey certain words using English language.	80%

Table 4

It is shown from the two tables above that the most preferred strategy chosen are the strategy of listening to talk shows, TV programs, etc in English language and also the strategy of planning out in advance on what they want to say for listening to improve their listening and speaking respectively. Learners believed that mass media help a lot in helping them to improve on their listening and speaking skills. *"I think mostly through mimicking and sheer curiosity because the best form of learning is by doing it", "helps in learning how to pronounce and also build vocabulary" and "songs and movies could enhance the listening and speaking skills as we can hear and try to imitate the words in the movies and the songs that are spoken by authentic English speakers"* are some of the responses acquired from the interview.

In improving speaking skills, respondents also believed in the importance of planning in advance on what they want to say or convey because it will help them to organise their thoughts, minimize errors and having a better delivering of message. Both of the strategies preferred above that the learners tend to use the strategies that fall

under the category of the metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies as according to the work of O'Malley et al (1985) in their work regarding the three categories of language learning strategies.
Strategies for Vocabulary Enhancement

Strategy	Percentage
Group words according to the parts of speech (eg; verbs, noun, adj.)	40%
Make a mental image of new words	40%
Write out new words in meaningful sentences	50%
Use flash cards in systematic way to learn new words	20%
Go over new words often when I first learn them to remember them better	70%
Make an effort to remember the situation when I first heard the new words	50%
Visualise the spelling of the new words	30%
Try using the new words in a variety of ways	80%

Table 5

As for strategies to enhance vocabulary, the data collected have shown that 80% of the respondents use the strategy of trying to use the new words in a variety of ways as how the saying 'practice makes perfect' goes. When the respondents are asked on when they usually use the new words they learn, some of the answers gathered are *"in online writing (blogging, Instagram, etc)* and *"while conversing with friends (orally and written)*. The second strategy that the respondents chose with a percentage of 70% is the strategy of reviewing the new words often in order for them to remember the new words they encounter. The least strategy the respondents usually use is the strategy remembering new words through flashcards, perhaps in consideration of time constraints or any other contributing factors.

Strategies for Grammar Improvement

Strategy	Percentage
Remember the formula of grammar	50%
Read on the explanation of the rules of grammar	50%

Play it by the ear	80%
Make grammar exercises	50%
Try to listen to other people's conversation on how they use the rules of grammar	80%

Table 6

Based on the table above, the data collected have shown that 80% of respondents usually use the strategy of trying to listen how other people use the rules of grammar in their conversation and also the strategy of to play grammar by the ear as there are some rules of grammar that cannot be explained. Only half of the respondents with the percentage of 50% respondents chose to remember and read the rules and formula of grammar. It is proven by previous researchers how grammar is usually work with the strategy of socio-affective as mentioned by O'Malley et al (1985). Learners will get better understanding of the use of the rules of grammar by them actually using it in their daily conversation and basis.

In general, respondents are also asked on their other preferences of strategies in improving their grammar skills as being a TESL students, English language is very common and crucial for them to improve on and acquire. Some of the responses gathered are *"I let people correct my mistakes so I can learn from them", "never stop reading familiarise yourself with the language…"* and *"read novels or talk to a friend whose language proficiency is higher than mine".*

Based on the study conducted, it has been identified that learners use language learning strategies in order to become good language learners. The data collected have shown that the respondents have pretty much the same preferences in using the language learning strategies. It is pretty obvious that the respondents pretty much use all categories of language learning strategies as what O'Malley et al (1985) and other previous researchers have discussed upon. Although different learners preferred different language learning strategies, there are some strategies that are leading among good language learners. All of the respondents tend to make use of all the three categories of language learning strategies which are cognitive, metacognitive and socio affective. They tend to use different categories of language learning strategies for different skills that they would to acquire and enhance on. The fact that the involved respondents are good language learners, thus they are quite aware of the strategies that they prefer to use suit to their learning styles.

Implications and Conclusion

Learning and acquiring a language is not an easy task, especially when it comes to learning a second language. It takes courage, effort and a lot of hard work. To acquire and master a second language, learners should be able to make use of the language learning strategies for them to become good language learners. Learning English language specifically as English language is widely used in today's world in all levels of education, it is very important for learners to be able to use and converse using the language both in formal situation and also in their daily basis. It is very important for learners to be able to identify their own learning styles and preferences in order for them to ensure which language learning strategies suit them better so the strategies can become a habit, eventually turn them to become good language learners. Past researchers have mentioned on how through time learners will eventually find out and figure their learning styles and will be able to identify the strategy they prefer in enhancing all skills in English language. However, it is very important to also bear in mind that when it comes to good language learners and language learning strategies, teachers and learners play an important and crucial role. Research has shown that proficiency and achievement is related to language learning strategies and all language learners use certain types of language learning strategies to a certain level, there are differences in the frequency and choice of use among learners. Teachers should first identify the learner's learning styles and

preferences then act as the facilitator to guide the learners to expose them to various sorts of language learning strategies for the learners to be able to experiment with the strategies suit their preferences. Last but not least, learners should also be given the autonomy to choose the strategies that they prefer to use that suit their learning styles for them to improve all the skills involved in learning English language.

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