

A Survey On The Language Learning Strategies Used By The UHB 1412 Students

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Abstract: This study generally investigates the language learning strategy (LLS) used by UHB 1412 students. The study also attempts to identify the language learning strategy used by good and poor learners of English. The Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was administered to hundred and four first year students with few modifications done in the questionnaires. The aspects that were examined entails the six language learning strategies classified by Oxford (1990) as cognitive strategies, memory strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. The data were then analysed using the Statistical Package for The Social Science (SPSS) version 12.00. The findings shows that the students attempted to use more metacognitive strategy and social strategy in their learning. In addition, the favoured language learning strategies used by good and poor learners were also identified. This study aims to equip students with the learning strategies they need in order to succeed in the learning of a second language. It is also hoped that the study could help both the language practitioners and experts in the field to consider the use of the six language learning strategies in achieving the goals of learning.

Abstrak: Kajian ini bertujuan mengkaji strategi pembelajaran yang digunakan oleh para pelajar yang mengikuti kursus wajib universiti yang dikenali sebagai UHB1412. Kajian ini juga melihat jenis-jenis strategi pembelajaran yang digunakan oleh golongan pelajar yang berkebolehan dan juga yang lemah dari segi penguasaan bahasa umumnya. Suatu Inventori Strategi Pembelajaran oleh Oxford (1990) yang dikenali sebagai SILL telah diedarkan bagi seratus empat para pelajar dari berlainan jurusan. Antara strategi-strategi pembelajaran yang dilihat meliputi strategi kognitif, strategi memori, strategi 'compensation', strategi metakognitif, strategi afektif dan strategi sosial. Kesemua data yang dikumpul telah dimasukkan ke dalam perisian SPSS, versi 12.00 bagi mendapatkan bacaan. Keseluruhannya, strategi pembelajaran berbentuk metakognitif dan sosial telah digunakan dan lain-lain strategi berkaitan pelajar-pelajar yang berkebolehan dan lemah turut dikaji. Oleh yang demikian, penggunaan strategi-strategi pembelajaran yang efisien dapat memperlengkapkan para pelajar bagi mencapai kecemerlangan.

Keywords: language learning strategy (LLS)

Introduction

Within the field of education over the last few decades, a gradual but significant shift has taken place resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning (Lessard Clouston, 1997). The emphasis was given on learners as to cultivate their attitudes, habits and competence as a lifelong learner. Knowles (1976) pointed out that teachers have to help learners develop the attitude and concept that learning is a lifetime process, and learners need to be equipped with the skills of self-directed lifelong learning. Applying the idea to language learning, language learning itself is a lifelong task, and language learning strategy is the skill for learners' self-directed language learning. According to Oxford's (1990) definition, language learning strategies refer to the specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students use to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing and using the second language.

Statement of Problem

Knowing the fact that English is important, there are a number of UTM students who lacks in acquiring the suitable language learning strategies in their learning. The students are seemed to be not aware of the current phenomenon of fresh graduates who lacks in the ability to speak and even write consistently in English. Therefore, it is crucial for learners to make a step ahead to improve their second language ability through the use of appropriate learning strategies. This study will aid learners to be aware of some common strategies that can be used to accomplish certain learning tasks and also to be better learners of a language through its implementation.

Apart from that, this study focus on poor learners language learning strategies as to find solutions for the existing problems in the identified areas. In particular, poor learners seem to use inappropriate learning strategies to improve their learning such as learning through memorization itself. This group of learners is reluctant to select the best learning strategies in acquiring English and use the memorizing method to complete certain piece of writing. In addition, some of the students are not able to make connections between the preferred learning strategies and the goals of learning. Therefore, they seem to continuously perform badly in learning English.

However, for this research, the focus is given on the six types of strategies used by Oxford (1990) such as the memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective strategies. This research is emphasized on the learning strategies used by students and the strategies used by good and poor learners. The research was held in the varsity itself, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai Johor. Therefore, this research will seek the insights of the language learning strategies that help students adequately in tertiary level.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- 1 To identify the language learning strategies employed by students of UHB 1412 during the learning process.
- 2 To identify the strategies used by good and poor learners in their UHB 1412 class.

Significance of the Study

The study aims to provide some information for the students on their language learning strategies that would facilitate the process of mastering English. With the information at hand, students will be able to identify the most appropriate learning strategy to enhance their learning. Next, the findings of this study act as a manual for the tertiary level students to obtain best learning strategies in order to achieve their language learning performance. It will also help to identify the most frequently used learning strategies in the tertiary level and the strategies used by good and poor learners as well.

Scope of the Study

The first year undergraduates of University Technology of Malaysia who enrolled into the UHB 1412 class were selected as the respondents for the study. The respondents were between the ages of 19 to 22 years old. This study is aim to provide the most common learning strategies used by the UHB 1412 students and strategies that was determined by good and poor learners of the language. Besides that, the data collection method comprised distribution of questionnaires to a number of hundred and four students from several faculties. The data was then analyzed based on the preferred learning strategies identified.

Methodology

Research Instrument

The quantitative research methodology was utilized in order to carry out the research. The instrument that was used to collect the data is through questionnaires. The questionnaire which was adapted from Oxford's SILL (1990) was used to identify strategies used by the UHB 1412 students. The preferred strategies used by good and poor learners were examined too through the distribution of questionnaires.

Questionnaires

A set of 55 questions divided into 3 sections was used in order to collect data for the research. There are four different types of question used in the questionnaire such as listing, yes-no, scale and open ended questions. The first section (Section A) comprises the background and attitudes questions. The first three questions in the questionnaire comprise the demographic information while another one question was on the MUET result. Next, the other remaining questions were on the attitudes of learning English either in or outside the university. In order to measure the strategy use, the next section in the questionnaire (Section B) was adapted from Oxford's (1990), Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. The SILL is an instrument for assessing the frequency of use of language learning strategies and is the most useful manual of learner strategy assessment. The SILL uses a 5 Likert-scale for which the learners are asked to indicate their response (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) to a strategy description such as "I try to find patterns in English".

There was some modification done on the items in the questionnaire. The version of the SILL that was used in this study is a 48 item instrument that is grouped into two main groups, direct strategies and indirect strategies, which are further subdivided into 6 groups. The cognitive strategies consist of fifteen items in the inventory which is used for linking new information with existing schemata and for analyzing and classifying it. The cognitive strategies are responsible for deep processing, forming and revising internal mental models and receiving and producing messages in the target language (e.g: repeating, getting idea quickly, analyzing and taking notes).

The memory strategies consist of seven items which are used for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it when need for communication (e.g: grouping, representing sounds in memory, structured reviewing, using physical response). Next, the compensation strategies include five items with strategies like guessing and using gestures. (e.g.: switching to the mother tongue, using clues, getting help and using a synonym).

Apart from that, the indirect strategies are divided into metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The metacognitive strategies consist of nine items that is used for organizing, planning, focusing and evaluating one's own learning (e.g: linking new information with already known one, seeking practice opportunities and self monitoring. The affective strategy includes six items which will be used for handling feelings, attitudes, and motivations (e.g: lowering anxiety by use of music, encouraging oneself and discussing feelings with others). Social strategies includes six items used for facilitating interaction by asking questions, and cooperating with others in the learning process, (eg. asking for classification, cooperating with others and developing cultural understanding. The third section (Section C) of the questionnaire consists of two open ended questions which was distributed to the first year students undergraduates during the UHB 1412 English class.

Respondents of the study

The respondents of the study were the first year UHB1412 students from the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Build Environment and Faculty of Management and Human Resource. The selection of the respondents was to help the researcher identify the performance of students in their Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The respondents were grouped into good and poor learners. Good learners were those who scored Band 3 to Band 6 while poor learners were scorers of Band 1 and Band 2. A total of hundred and four respondents were reported in carrying out this study. The questionnaires were distributed to the students and the information was used to obtain data in helping the researchers to get accurate information.

Result and Discussion

Based on the overall findings, most of the students favored to use the metacognitive and social strategies in UHB1412 subject which were made up by 55% and 42%. The other remaining strategies such as the cognitive (45%), memory (44%), compensation (48%) and affective (37%) were used at times only by the students who enrolled into the UHB 1412 paper.

It can be seen that the most frequent used strategies among the students in the UHB 1412 classroom are metacognitive learning strategies and social learning strategies. There were 55% of the students who chose the metacognitive learning strategies as the most useful one to them. Students who posed metacognitive learning strategies knew to organize and set objectives in their learning. This means they intended to evaluate their language learning in an efficient way. The students had the ability to prioritize what was important in their learning such as looking for ways to improve themselves when they encountered with English problems. Some were even very practical in which they were able to notice their English mistakes and thus look for information that help them in their learning. The usage of these strategies however was seen as Wenden (1987) stated that “learners should regulate their learning by planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning activities”. Based from the findings itself, it could be clearly seen that students assesses their needs and preferences and choose what they want to learn and how they should learn a language. So, this shows that those strategies were the main contributor to learning of English by the investigated group of students.

Besides that, the social learning strategies were also regarded as the most frequent used one. This strategy merely can be accessed through asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others. However, in this study the highest rated item was on “If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again”. The students looked for every possible opportunity to be attached in the learning situations by asking more proficient users of the language to help them. Thus, the students with the ability to practice social strategies in their learning are generally motivated to learn something that they are uncertain and are cooperated with more proficient users of the language.

Apart from that, the good learners tend to use the cognitive strategies most frequently in their learning. The good learners were graded based on their MUET results. The assessment for choosing the strategies used by good learners was based of the bands that they obtained in the examination. Students with Band 3, 4, 5 and 6 students were categorized as good learners of the language while those with Band 1 and 2 were poor learners. The results from the research found out that good learners like to find new forms in English. The forms are the grammar and vocabulary items. Besides that, some of the responses from the learners stated that they tend to make guesses for a particular word rather than checking it in the dictionary.

In addition, cognitive means everything that happens inside our mind, and if people have learning strategies that relates to cognitive, all their actions are based on their working brain or mental operations.

This strategy showed that the students applied the most suitable learning modes for themselves. The students' preference of learning English is through TV shows and movies. Moreover, the students used the repetition to help them with a particular task. Although the strategy of repeating might not at first sound particularly creative, important or meaningful, but it can be used in highly innovative ways in which repeatedly listening to native speakers of the new language on a tape or record.

Besides that, strategies used by poor learners were identified too. Those who scored Band 1 and Band 2 tend to learn new English words through memorization. It is shown that the respondents felt that the memory strategy as useful to them. Besides that, there was some students who used their applied knowledge to make sure that the English word is suitable to be used or not in their writing. This shows that the respondents are more likely to place a word into a context that they have heard or read as a way to ensure that the particular word is suitable in their writing. So, it is clearly seen that the students tend to make mental linkage by either placing new words into a context or by elaboration. Most common, the weaker students will try to memorize a whole phrase in order to complete his or her writing. In conclusion, the applied memory strategy by poor learners showed that the recognition of words is through memorization.

Conclusion

From the findings, it can be seen that the strategies used by students are mainly on the metacognitive language learning strategies and social language learning strategies. This shows that the students had motivation to learn the target language no matter what goals they intended to achieve. Students who possess metacognitive learning strategies have the ability to control their own learning, to have clear goals on improving their English, and to look for possible ways in implementing the input they gain. Moreover, by acquiring the metacognitive strategies, students may execute and amend their mistakes, pay attention to what is thought to be important in order to accomplish the goals, to always looking for ways to be a better learner, and to set their own learning schedule to learn to ensure what is learnt is vital.

Social strategies are strategies that merely can be accessed if a person immerses himself or herself in the environment where practice is possible. Students who posed the social learning strategies know to interact well with both peers and more proficient language users. The regulation of using these strategies is that a person needs to look for every opportunity to be in learning situations. The usage of these strategies however can only be contributed indirectly to learning as Oxford (1989) classifies learning strategies as in two main classes known as the direct learning strategies and indirect learning strategies. In her definition, direct strategies "directly involve the target language" and "require mental processing of the language" while indirect strategies "support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language". Thus social strategies, such as asking questions and cooperation with others, facilitate interaction with others, often in a discourse situation. Logically, individuals will apply this strategy depending on the difficulty in acquiring certain task and to help the learning process effectively by posing for clarifications and verifications.

The metacognitive and social strategies are strategies that are reported to be in high frequencies of usage by the respondents. In a simple conclusion, students possess and practice these strategies more than any other strategies available in the inventory. The explanations of why they use the strategies are not too difficult to explain. One of the reasons of students' preference of using the metacognitive strategies is that they know about learning and controlling learning through planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning activity. The students seemed to notice their English mistakes and use that information to help them do better. Paying attention to the conversations made by others in English lead to better performance in the language. On the other hand, the social strategies are important too in which students ask questions and cooperate with others as in response to understand and become more aware of the feelings or

thoughts of fellow students and those in the foreign language culture. In this way, students learning process seem to be more interconnected when they ask questions on matters that they are uncertain with.

Apart from that, findings of strategies used by good learners showed that they favored to use the cognitive learning strategies. This shows that the students practiced conversations in English, had the ability to practice the sound in English, and watch television shows or movies to learn English. Besides that, the students were able to select language situations that allow one's preferences to be used, actively being involved in language learning.

In addition, the memory learning strategies used by poor learners has been observed too. Two distinct points of view exist in the studies with respect to strategies of less effective L2 learners. The first view is that less effective L2 learners do not really know what strategies they use and they cannot readily describe their strategies (Nyikos 1987). The second perspective is that such learners use fewer strategies than those of more successful learners, and that strategies of less effective learners often involve strategies such as translation, rote memorization, and repetition (Nyikos 1987).

So it is hoped that the teacher teaching at these areas know what to do with regards to students learning strategies in order to be good language learners.

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