

# **A Study On The Language Learning Strategies Used Among UHB 1412 Students. (English For Academic Communication)**

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**Abstract:** The study investigated the language learning strategies used among UHB 1412 students using questionnaire and observation focusing on three objectives; the language learning strategies used by the students, the language learning strategies used when completing group work tasks and the students' most preferred strategies in language learning. Descriptive findings suggested that the students were frequent users of strategies; the most frequently used being metacognitive strategies and the least frequently used being social strategies. The observations reported that students used various strategies but the social strategies showed a significant result as the most used when completing group work tasks. A further analysis on the descriptive data showed that students preferred to use metacognitive strategies to focus on the improvement of their language learning. The findings are reported and discussed before recommendations are made. Recommendations for pedagogical implications suggested that teachers need to conduct teacher training and strategy training. Recommendations for future research proposed the studies to be made to larger samples.

*Keyword:* language learning strategies

## **Introduction**

In the Malaysian educational context, English has long been recognized as the second language that empowers a need for students to be competent and proficient in this language. This is for its significant use in all levels of education along with other field of work. English becomes a need as it also serves students' social and communicative functions. For this particular reason, the fundamental issue that arose is that language learning strategies play an important role to drive students to learn the language at most; prominently during their learning process and to be further exceeded later in their future undertaking.

It is assumed that improved proficiency in language learning depends on how students enable themselves to adapt to strategies that work best for them. A study by O' Malley and Chamot (1990) also suggests that effective language learners are aware of the strategies they use and why they use them. However, the existence of various language learning strategies to be acknowledged by students sometimes may result in the fact that some approaches or strategies may not promote success for any learner. This is because some students are unaware of the suitability of the strategy used towards their language learning capability. Some strategies may not be responsive as students are unable to develop the right approach to learning.

## **Statement of Problem**

English has long been recognized as a second language in Malaysia. It has a significant demand nowadays as English is now considered as very important in various fields, including social, educational and communicative functions. Furthermore, the Malaysian government has also put an ordering force for all the citizens to be able to acquire English. To accomplish this need, students are advised to adopt the best strategies to become good language learners. With regard to this, students must be aware of the contributing factors that can determine their language learning.

Wenden (1991) lists seven criteria of good language learners which can be taken as guidance in making the students to have reasons for their selection of the best language learning strategies. Firstly, good language learners should have insight to their own learning styles and preferences as well as the nature of the task itself. They should adopt a personal style or positive learning strategy that fits their needs and preferences. Then, they have to take an active approach to learning task and involve themselves in the second language. This can be done by seeking out opportunities to communicate in the target language when and where possible. Good language learners are willing to take risk too. Learners should realize that they cannot inhibit themselves from facing all the challenges and difficulties when learning a second language. They should try to get their messages across using any means to establish communications. Moreover, good language learners are also good guessers. They must have the skill to use clues effectively, and make justifiable inferences. The clues can be in context, situation, explanation, trial and error or translation. Next, learners must always monitor their own speech and others', to attend how well their speech is being received. This is also to prepare them to attend to both form and content when learning a language. To be successful language learners, they should always think in the target language by developing a separate reference system for them to revise their language learning. Lastly, good language learners always practice. This is for them to have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the language.

Regarding the factors stated above, this study will focus on UTM students' language learning strategies. Students are now more aware of improving their English but sometimes they lack the knowledge on how to become good language learners. They are required to be proficient in English as it may give them beneficial purposes towards other universal opportunities later in their future undertaking. The Deputy Prime Minister in the New Straits Time newspaper dated April 17, 2007 once quoted, "national language Bahasa Malaysia is important, but Malaysian students must attain a respectable level of fluency in English so as to ensure that they are no less qualified when competing globally". With regard to this issue, the researcher's main concern is that students nowadays may not be contributing much in fulfilling this requirement. Even when students try to learn at most, it seems that they are still lacking in acquiring the skills needed. This may be the result of not selecting the best strategies in acquiring English. Some students are even reluctant to look into this matter and continue to fail without knowing that their choices of strategies are preventing them to learn English effectively. Language learning strategies may be adopted unconsciously while learning, but the selection of the right one is the most vital thing if students want to succeed in learning the language or for some other related purposes.

Therefore, this study will look into the learning strategies that students use when completing the tasks given in UHB 1412 class. Generally, this subject is designed to prepare students for the skills needed to perform academic tasks, such as taking notes from written and oral/aural texts, producing academic assignments and making oral presentations. The tasks assigned will be in the form of individual and group projects.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are

1. to investigate the language learning strategies used by the first year TESL students in UHB 1412 class.
2. to identify the language learning strategies used most when completing group work tasks on the reading unit in UHB 1412.
3. to determine students' language learning strategies preferences.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study is important as the awareness of selecting the appropriate language learning strategies can be a major factor in contributing to students' success in their language learning. Learners of a language must be able to create or seek out opportunities to learn most effectively based on their own learning strategies which can enhance the acquisition of English. In order to do so, learners of language must be given the prospect and opportunity to understand and identify their own language learning path. The exposure of available language learning strategies can assist students to further maximize their ability in language learning. The awareness of what works best for them in learning can be reflected in students' capability in understanding and solving problems or completing tasks.

Furthermore, this study may give teachers some insights on how their students approach a task or problem. This will act as valuable information for teachers to later plan their teaching process as they can select the best method to prepare for students' strategies towards their language learning process. As students' strategies differ from one another, the findings of this study may expose to teachers on how to handle situations regarding students' language acquisition or level of proficiency as each of them achieves language learning goals differently. This may be in the way of how teachers can train students to use the correct strategies to manage their own language learning. Generally, some knowledge about students' language learning strategies can be a useful tool for teachers to plan their teaching and learning activities.

## **Scope of the Study**

This study involved thirty respondents in a single classroom. The respondents of this study are first year TESL students from Faculty of Education, UTM. The respondents, who are between the ages of 20 to 22 years old, are students of UHB 1412 class. The data collections were from observation during classroom activity and questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents after the completion of the observations.

## **Methodology**

### **Respondents of the Study**

The respondents of this study were first year students from TESL programme who are taking UHB 1412 course from Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. TESL students were specifically selected using purposive non-random sampling as they have the knowledge and are more familiar with language learning strategies as this area of study had been exposed in their program courses. Moreover, TESL students are also considered proficient users of English language. All of the respondents acquired band 4 and 5 in their MUET result. Thus, the researcher was able to emphasize this study on the application of the language learning strategies without the limitations of the respondents' language use. Therefore, this specific selection of the respondents was expected to provide the researcher with various applications of strategies during the learning process.

Meanwhile, the selection of this course was based on its nature which focuses on students' involvement in language learning activities. Moreover, students are encouraged to complete language tasks in group discussions and this collaborative learning situation promotes the application of various language learning strategies.

All thirty respondents were given a set of questionnaire to be answered. Meanwhile, groups of students were later selected for the collection of the qualitative data. These groups were observed during the activities to identify the strategies they applied to complete the group work tasks.

## **Research Instruments**

### **1 Survey Using Oxford's SILL Questionnaire**

For this study, questionnaire was used to gather information from the students on the strategies used in language learning. This method was specifically chosen for the collection of the quantitative data on students' language learning strategies and to answer the research questions of this study.

Thirty sets of questionnaire were distributed to the respondents of this study to survey the strategies they used in language learning. The questionnaire was used to identify the strategies applied in language learning and to examine the most preferred language learning strategies by the students. The questionnaire was adapted based on Oxford's SILL (1990) which was divided into six parts based on Oxford's (1990) classification of language learning strategies. However, only four parts of Oxford's SILL were adapted for the purpose of this study.

The questionnaire used in this study was divided into two sections; Section A which requires respondents' background information meanwhile in Section B, students were asked to answer questions on language learning strategies. The questionnaire can be referred in Appendix B.

### **2 Observation**

For the purpose of this study, classroom observations were carried out in examining the language learning strategies used by the students when completing language activities. The researcher observed groups of students and identified the strategies that the students used when completing a language task.

Furthermore, the instruments used for observations were checklist (Refer Appendix C) and video recording. The checklist was used to find out the application of the strategies made by the students when completing the tasks in groups. The researcher noted down any actions taken by the students as well as identified the strategies involved throughout the activities using the checklist. This checklist was adapted by the researcher based on Oxford's SILL (1990). Two observations were conducted on selected groups of students.

Furthermore, the other instrument used in the collection of qualitative data was video recording of the activities. For each observation, the researcher recorded students' activities when completing the given tasks. The researcher further examined the recording to support the findings of the observation.

## **Result**

First, the language learning strategies that are used by the students in UHB 1412 class are identified, the most frequently used being metacognitive strategies followed by cognitive, social and the least frequently used being the compensation strategies. Next, the language learning strategies that are used in completing group work tasks are determined and discussed which result in social strategies being the most frequently used. Lastly, the most preferred strategies in language learning are further discussed by analyzing the sub-strategies applied in the metacognitive strategies. However, the findings and discussions presented in this chapter are rather suggestive than conclusive as the findings do not represent all language learners.

## **Discussion**

### **Language Learning Strategies Used by the First Year TESL Students in UHB 1412**

Based on the findings of this study, the language learning strategies used by the students involved all four categories. According to Oxford (1990) SILL profile of results presented earlier in data analysis, students were reported to 'usually use' all the four strategies in language learning as all the averages were ranked in the 'high' category. However, the overall result shows that metacognitive strategies were identified as the most frequently used followed by cognitive, social and compensation strategies.

Metacognitive strategies were believed to be the most used in UHB 1412 class as students wanted to improve their language learning for specific goals. Therefore, they used the strategies to seek all existing opportunities to practice the language inside and outside classroom setting. By having clearer objectives to improve and acquire the language as well as to prepare them for course-examination purposes, students were more guided to achieve their objectives when they apply metacognitive strategies by planning, organizing and evaluating their own learning.

Moreover, compensation strategies were reported the least frequently used strategies as the respondents of this study were quite proficient in English; therefore the strategies included in this category very much do not reflect students' choice of strategies in approaching language learning. Compensation strategies are more suitable to students with limitations in using the language.

### **The Language Learning Strategies Used Most When Completing Group Work Tasks**

Based on the observation, the findings of this study show that students used all four strategies when completing group work tasks. However, social strategies were reported to be the most used followed by cognitive, compensation and metacognitive strategies.

Generally, completing tasks in group work requires students to be very cooperative with all group members. Therefore, social strategies were the most significant choice made by students as these strategies very much reflect on group work strategy approaches. Moreover, students also need to speak in English while working with other group members; therefore they were required to be able to communicate efficiently. Social strategies were used frequently as these strategies helped them to communicate using the language more effectively when working in groups.

### **Students' Most Preferred Strategies in Language Learning.**

Based on the findings from research question 1, metacognitive strategies were reported to be the most preferred language learning strategies by the students. From the earlier conclusion that metacognitive strategies are the most used as students preferred a more purposive and organized learning, these strategies can also be assumed to reflect on students' individual language learning preferences; which include application of strategies that prepare them for the purposive learning.

Apart from acquiring the language, these strategies were also applied as students aimed to learn the language for examination purposes; which will require them to have clearer objectives, proper planning and continuous evaluation of their own learning. This is to ensure that their language learning is effective and therefore adequate in order to pass the course examination. Furthermore, students also prefer to use these strategies as they can seek other opportunities and possible ways to enhance their language learning resources; besides having a formal learning in the classroom.

Based on all the summaries above, different tasks promote different strategies. Thus, the findings indicated that there was a slight mismatch between students' most used language learning strategies between individual learning preferences and in-group work activities. Generally, this inequality is due to the different learning environment as one involves more on personal language learning strategies preferences while the other was based on strategies that were applied when working with others. However, it can also be concluded that these differences occur as a result of students' lack of awareness in adapting the suitable strategies to approach a task for effective language learning.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study provide a better understanding of the ways students approach language learning. Ramsden (1992) suggests that studying the learning experience of a learner is a way to improve teaching. Therefore, this study reveals the strategies students use in approaching different situations of language learning. Thus, to make possible the teaching of effective strategies and avoiding those that impedes progress. Furthermore, obtaining knowledge on language learning strategies enables teachers to integrate appropriate strategies to effective teaching and in the same time helping students to have control of their own learning process. This is very much similar to the proverb, "Providing a person with a fish will feed him for a day, but teaching him how to fish would provide food to last him a life time."

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