

A CASE STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF
SUCCESSFUL AND LESS SUCCESSFUL ESL LEARNERS IN A SUBURBAN
SCHOOL IN SIBU, SARAWAK.

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To my beloved family members especially, Monica, Rose and John, for their enduring love, encouragement and support.

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated ESL learning strategy in suburban context using questionnaire and interview focusing on three aspects; the LLS used by ESL learners, the differences in the types of LLS used by successful and less successful ESL learners and the differences in the ways the LLS were used by the two groups of learners. Descriptive statistics indicated that the learners were moderate strategy users, the most frequently used being metacognitive strategies ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.79$) and the least frequently used being social strategies ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.57$). Independent Samples T-test showed that successful learners reported using overall strategy and five of the categories of strategies significantly more frequently than the less successful learners except memory strategies. A number of differences in the ways the successful and less successful learners used LLS are presented. The findings are reported and discussed before pedagogical implications and recommendations are made.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menyiasat strategi pembelajaran bahasa dengan menggunakan soal selidik and temubual dan berfokus kepada tiga aspek; penggunaan strategi pembelajaran bahasa di kalangan pelajar, perbezaan pengguna strategi pembelajaran bahasa antara pelajar yang berjaya dan yang kurang berjaya serta perbezaan dari segi cara penggunaan strategi pembelajaran bahasa oleh kedua-dua kumpulan tersebut. Data deskriptif yang didapati menunjukkan tahap penggunaan strategi pembelajaran bahasa pada tahap yang sederhana oleh pelajar. Strategi metacognitif adalah strategi yang digunakan pada kadar yang paling tinggi ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.79$) dan strategi yang paling jarang digunakan oleh pelajar adalah strategi sosial ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.57$). Pelajar yang berjaya telah dilaporkan menggunakan strategi pembelajaran bahasa pada tahap yang lebih tinggi secara keseluruhan dan bagi lima kategori strategi pembelajaran bahasa dengan signifikan jika dibandingkan dengan pelajar yang kurang berjaya kecuali untuk strategi memori. Beberapa perbezaan juga didapati berkaitan dengan cara penggunaan strategi pembelajaran bahasa antara pelajar berjaya dan kurang berjaya. Hasil kajian dilaporkan dan dibincangkan sebelum implikasi dan cadangan diberi sebagai penutup.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

English language is an international language and is therefore used as the language for global interactions. In international relations, it is used in major international meetings and conventions. Proficiency in English is a means by which we can exchange our thoughts and ideas with people of different nations. Besides, it is also the lingua franca of the business and commercial world. Fluency in the language can ease transactions in the commercial arena. Other than that, it can be considered as the technical language of Science and Technology in this era as most current developments in this field are circulated in English. To have a good command of the language would enable us to have access to current scientific and technological knowledge much needed as Malaysia strides to become a fully developed nation by 2020. History has proven that to progress and endure, people cannot neglect the pursuit of knowledge. Malaysians, inclusive of students, should pursuit knowledge not only from within but also beyond its borders. A good command of the language enables us to keep abreast with the latest developments and achieve greater and faster progress.

1.2 Background of the Study

It has generally been acknowledged that the command of English language among ESL learners are poor nowadays. Learners who have failed to achieve a certain level of mastery of English language have difficulties in entering foreign universities. A survey conducted on reasons why graduates had not been able to secure jobs revealed poor command of English as the most popular reason given by resource managers for not hiring fresh graduates (The Borneo Post, 18 April, 2005). Recently, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak in the committee meeting on unemployed graduates confirmed that many unemployed graduates could not communicate in English (The Star, 12 July, 2006).

The government has taken and is still taking steps to remedy the situation. The Ministry of Education has introduced English as the medium of instruction in the teaching of Science and Mathematics in schools starting with Year 1, Form 1 and Lower 6 in the year 2003. The policy has been implemented in matriculation and colleges in 2004 and will be implemented in polytechnics in 2008. When fully implemented, the public examinations for the two subjects will be fully conducted in English, Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah or Form 3 level in 2008 and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or Form 5 level in 2007. It has been fully implemented at Penilaian Menengah Rendah or Form 3 level in 2005. All efforts are carried out at ensuring a generation of quality graduates equipped to handle challenges of the global world. To further facilitate the program, the ministry is conducting short and long term intensive courses to equip teachers nationwide. Course-ware, laptops and projectors that cost millions are also provided. The government is retraining unemployed graduates based on the current demands (The Borneo Post, 22 March, 2005). Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin recently revealed that the Ministry of Education is taking foreign English language teachers and sending local English language teachers overseas with the hope that these teachers can help improve the mastery of English language among learners (The Star, 4 June, 2006).

Efforts implemented at higher level should also be complemented at ground level. Teachers in schools can get down to the root of the problem and find out the causes of the poor command in English language among the students, subsequently, search for ways to overcome the problem. The poor command of English language is also reflected in the learners' results for Malaysian public examinations in the teacher-researcher's school whereby less than twenty percent achieved Grade A and B for English subject at Form 5 or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia level and less than forty-five percent achieved Grade A and B for English subject at Form 3 or Penilaian Menengah Rendah level each year. There are many other suburban schools facing the same problem. Since the learning environment for the students in most of these schools are similar, one of the key factors influencing success in language acquisition could be the language learning strategies.

Research abroad on the topic of language learning strategies is abundant (O' Malley et. al., 1985; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989 etc.), but not many studies have been carried out in Malaysia. Those local researchers who have shown interest to do further research in the field include; Abdul Ghafar Hj. Don, 1974; Mohamed Amin Embi, 1996; Radha Nambiar, 1998; Faizahani, 2002 and so forth.

Previously, studies in the field have been carried out on urban or rural or a comparison of urban versus rural schools but not suburban schools. Padmini Mildred Thiyagarajah (2003) finds that rural Malay learners reported limited use of language learning strategies and their competencies and strategies are underdeveloped. Low frequency of cognitive usage according to the researcher suggests that learners might not be doing much thinking during their learning process. Urban learners with higher socio-economic status have been found to have greater exposure to the target language and more opportunity to use it in the real context (Yang, 1993).

These previous studies have not covered the learning strategies of learners in suburban areas. Would studies on the language learning strategies in suburban areas produce the same findings? In addition to that, in the previous research on the language

learning strategies, no gap has been created in terms of the levels of achievements between or among the groups of learners. Thus, there is a possibility that learning strategies used by learners of almost the same level are similar. In this research however, a gap is created between the successful and less successful learners whereby those who achieved between 41 and 69 marks for the school examinations have been weeded out with the hope of getting a clearer distinction in the language learning strategies used by the two groups of learners.

Thus, unlike the previous research, this research aims at studying the language learning strategy (LLS) of successful and less successful English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in suburban context with the hope that a clearer distinction in the usage of language learning strategies can be found since a gap is created in terms of the levels of achievements between the two groups of learners. At secondary school level there is no other better level to start with other than at Form 1 level.

1.3 Statement of Problem

It has generally been acknowledged that the command of English language is poor among ESL learners nowadays. To the teacher-researcher's knowledge, the study on language learning strategies has not been carried out in suburban context. As mentioned earlier in the previous section, since the learning environment for the learners in most suburban schools are similar, one of the key factors influencing success in language acquisition could be the language learning strategies. This research thus looks into the language learning strategies used by the ESL learners in suburban context with the hope that it provides better insights into language learning strategies of learners and subsequently helps facilitate the teaching and learning process of the less successful language learners in similar context in future.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

In view that language learning strategies influence learners' proficiency, this study thus attempts to study the language learning strategy of successful and less successful English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.

1.5 Research Objectives

The research objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the language learning strategies used by ESL learners.
2. To compare the differences in the types of language learning strategies used by successful and less successful ESL learners.
3. To investigate whether there are any differences in the ways the language learning strategies are used by successful and less successful ESL learners.

1.6 Research Questions

The study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the language learning strategies that are used by ESL learners?
2. Are there any differences in the types of language learning strategies used by successful and less successful ESL learners?
3. In what ways do successful and less successful ESL learners differ in their use of language learning strategies?

1.7 Significance of the Study

English language teachers should take personal interest in the poor command of English language nationwide. The causes of the poor command of the languages should be established and the remedies to overcome the problem should be based on sound theoretical frameworks and research findings. In other words, sound research findings should be put into practical use. That way, teachers can bridge theory and practice (Mohamed Amin Embi, 1996).

Since the key factor in the language learning process is the learners, the researchers should look into the learners' language learning strategy. The educators should comprehend the language learning strategies and identify the various effective approaches and techniques used by the more successful learners. The findings can help educators facilitate teaching and learning more effectively.

Stern (1989), cited in Kouraogo (1993) stresses that by discovering what the most effective strategies are, the strategies can be taught to less successful learners, thus enabling these learners to progress faster. Researchers such as Chamot and Kupper (1989), Cohen and Hosenfeld (1981), Oxford (1990) and Cohen (1990) put forward that unsuccessful learners can be taught to use more appropriate and suitable strategies and they suggest that the use of better strategies will eventually results in better language performances. Thus, the study here may enable the researcher to find appropriate and suitable strategies in the context of the suburban schools. Chamot (1987), stresses that the nature of the language task determines the number and kind of strategies used. This provides input for educators when it comes to planning and preparing of lessons and teaching materials.

Materials used to teach learning strategies for language and content have been developed by Chamot and O' Malley in 1987 (O' Malley and Chamot, 1990). According to Kouraogo (1993), a better knowledge of how people learn foreign languages can lead

to cost-effective teaching and learning. If the most commonly engaged strategies could be identified, specific activities can be developed thus reducing the time and cost taken to develop materials, syllabus and curriculum. A better understanding language learning strategies enables the development of program to help learners identify their own strategies and enhance the students' learning strategies. The learners can be trained to be more efficient, successful and autonomous in language learning. Equipping learners with the learning strategies will help give them the much needed boost to maximize their potential.

In short, the study of language learning strategies will benefit learners, educators, programmers and syllabus designers.

1.8 Operational Definitions

Successful learners in this study include learners who scored 70 percent or more in English language for both the Mid Semester One and Semester One Exam at school level. These learners also achieved Grade A for English language in the Malaysian public examination at Primary 6 or Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) level.

Less successful learners in this study include learners who achieved 40 percent or less in English language in both the school exams. These less successful learners achieved Grade C and D for English language in the Malaysian public examination at Primary 6 or Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) level.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter first of all raises the issue of the problem of lack of proficiency of English language that needs to be addressed. Research into the language learning strategies has been proposed as a step towards overcoming the problem especially in suburban context. This chapter also explores some research questions that will be addressed in the next few chapters. The significance of the study in language learning strategies is put forward before the operational definitions of successful and less successful learners have been made to provide a clearer scope for discussion before concluding the chapter.