Identifying English language learning strategies used by polytechnic students*

Identificando estrategias de aprendizaje del idioma inglés utilizadas por estudiantes politécnicos

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ABSTRACT

English is regarded as the second language (ESL) in Malaysia and is one of the compulsory subjects at Malaysian polytechnic. To master the language, students need to have their own language learning strategies. The application of language learning strategies is beneficial in helping students to improve their language skills. The current study aims to investigate the polytechnic students' use of English language learning strategies. Survey method was used to gather the data of this study. The respondents were among 151 students from a polytechnic in Malaysia. The 50 items from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) were adopted for the survey. The findings revealed that the polytechnic students have their own preferred English language learning strategies based on the six categories from SILL. It is hoped that the language educators could take the information gathered from this study to direct their efforts in promoting the English language learning activities which suit the students' English language learning strategies to help them in improving their English language skills.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), polytechnic students.

RESUMEN

El inglés es considerado como el segundo idioma (ESL) en Malasia y es una de las materias obligatorias en el politécnico de Malasia. Para dominar el idioma, los estudiantes deben tener sus propias estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas. La aplicación de estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas es beneficiosa para ayudar a los estudiantes a mejorar sus habilidades lingüísticas. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo investigar el uso de estrategias de aprendizaje del idioma inglés por parte de los estudiantes politécnicos. Se utilizó el método de encuesta para recopilar los datos de este estudio. Los encuestados se encontraban entre 151 estudiantes de un politécnico en Malasia. Los 50 ítems del Inventario Estratégico para el Aprendizaje de Idiomas (SILL) fueron adoptados para la encuesta. Los resultados revelan que los estudiantes politécnicos tienen sus propias estrategias preferidas de aprendizaje del idioma inglés basadas en las seis categorías de SILL. Se espera que los educadores de idiomas puedan aprovechar la información recopilada de este estudio para dirigir sus esfuerzos en la promoción de actividades de aprendizaje del idioma inglés que se adapten a las estrategias de aprendizaje del idioma inglés de los estudiantes para ayudarlos a mejorar sus habilidades en el idioma inglés.

Palabras clave: inglés como segundo idioma (ESL), estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas (LLS), inventario de estrategias para el aprendizaje de idiomas (SILL), estudiantes politécnicos.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies are thoughts and actions made by learners in acquiring knowledge of a new language (Chamot, 2004). There are many ways of learning and it can happen inside or outside of the classroom. The learners are given autonomy and be able to become independent in their own process of learning a language (Ali, Zaman, & Khan, 2018). In the second language (L2) acquisition, the current learning trends allow learners to explore and exploit learning strategies that suit them best. The language learning strategies are defined as the specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their progress in internalising, storing, retrieving, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990). Language learning strategies can also be referred to as the factors which verify the students' competency and their way of learning a second language (Yunus, Sulaiman, & Embi, 2013). Therefore, the application of language learning strategies by the learners can be considered as useful for their language mastery (Hashim et al., 2018).

Oxford (1990) stated that language learning strategies are the students' specific actions, behaviours, techniques, which often used in improving their second language skills. It promotes the students' autonomy in monitoring their own learning progress. According to Cohen (1998), learners are aware of their use of language learning strategy with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and gain a better understanding of target language. Additionally, Chamot (2004) declared that in order to achieve success in learning a new language, the learners must be able to have conscious thoughts related to the learning process and act accordingly. They need to apply strategic learning approaches, understand what needs to be done, and able to execute the learning strategies that suit them best. To add, Oxford (1990) found that excellent language learners use many kinds of language learning strategies which match their own language learning styles. The frequency and preferences of employing language learning strategies are the most significant factors that distinguish successful language learners and poor language learners (Zakaria et al., 2018). Identifying learning strategies used by the successful learners are vital in helping the poor learners to become proficient. Language learning strategies can be trained and it will be useful to the learners (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Learners can learn and practice how to use and apply the language learning strategies, and be able to adapt and adopt the strategies to their own learning style. Language learning strategies are important because one, it helps learners to better understand the process of language learning which involve cognitive, social, affective, and two, the possibility to teach less successful language learners the language learning strategies used by successful learners to help them learn the second language better (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Malaysian polytechnic aimed for its students to be equipped with good communication skills especially in English. The students must be able to portray good command of English after they graduated from the institution (Jabatan Pendidikan Politeknik, n.d.). However, a group of researchers found that the polytechnic students have low proficiency in the English language (Yasin, Shaupil, Mukhtar, Ghani, & Rashid, 2010). Thus, the use of language learning strategies by the students will help them to improve their English language proficiency and acquire better communication skills. Teachers could also apply the strategies to make English learning easier in their teaching (Weng et al., 2016; Saad et al., 2015). Teachers may plan in terms of selecting learning materials, implementing oral activities, and learning tasks (Yusri et al., 2013). As there are numerous studies on language learning strategies being conducted by the scholars (Ali, Zaman, & Khan, 2018; Chuin & Kaur, 2015; Marina, 2017; Oxford, 1990; Yunus, Sulaiman, & Embi, 2013), however, lack of study was done on language learning strategies in Malaysian polytechnic setting. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the polytechnic students' preference of the English language learning strategies in improving their English language skills based on Strategy Inventory for Language Learning by Rebecca Oxford (1990). This study aims to identify polytechnic students' preferences of the English language learning strategies based on the six categories of language learning strategies in SILL.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative method to investigate the polytechnic students' use of English language learning strategies.

Research design

The survey design was used as the research design of this study. The survey questionnaire was developed by adopting the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning from Oxford (1990). The survey questionnaire was used to collect the data needed to answer the research questions.

Instrumentation

The instrument for data collection of this study was a set of online questionnaire adopted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Rebecca Oxford (1990). This inventory consists of fifty items and uses a three-point Likert scale. The three-point Likert scale is (1) Always, (2) Sometimes, and (3) Never choices to focus on a construct, "students' preference of English language learning strategies". The fifty items are divided into six categories namely memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Before the questionnaire was distributed, the researcher gave it to a few experienced English lecturers to check on its face and content validity.

Participants

The samples of this study were 151 students from semester one until six from December 2018 session of a polytechnic in Melaka, Malaysia. All of these students were either have taken Communicative English class or involved in English activities in polytechnic. The participants have different levels of English language proficiency.

Sampling technique

Random sampling technique was used for this study. A link to an online questionnaire survey was distributed to all English language lecturers' online groups. The students were invited to participate in answering the survey on voluntary basis.

Data analysis

The data from SILL for this study were analysed to obtain the percentages and frequency. The data analysis for the percentages and frequency counts was conducted using descriptive statistical analysis.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the results of this study and discusses the results in relation to the literature. Table 1 shows the demographic statistics of the respondents.

Table 1. The Demographic Characteristics (n=151)

Demographic Characteristics	n	%
Gender -Male -Female	88 63	58% 42%
Age -18 - 20 -21 - 23 -24 - 26 -27 - 29 -Other	110 38 1 1 1	73% 25% 1% 1% 1%
Department -Department of Tourism and Hospitality -Department of Commerce -Department of Civil Engineering -Department of Electrical Engineering -Department of Mechanical Engineering	20 20 17 62 32	13% 13% 11% 41% 21%

Table 1 shows that the survey was dominated by male, 58%, as compared to female, 42%. The participants were among age ranged 18 to 20 years old, 73%. Followed by students aged 21 to 23 years old, 25%, and the rest were from age ranged 24 to 26, 27 to 29, and other, 1 % respectively. Most of the students who participated were from the Department of Electrical Engineering, 41%, and from the Department of Mechanical Engineering, 21%. The other students were from the Department of Tourism and Hospitality, 13%, Department of Commerce, 13%, and the Department of Civil Engineering, 11%.

Table 2. Memory strategies used by the students in learning english

Memory strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
Think of relationships between words.	31.8% (48)	64.9% (98)	3.3% (5)
Use new English words in a sentence.	35.8% (54)	60.3% (91)	4% (6)
Connect the sound and image to remember the word.	45% (68)	50.3% (76)	4.6% (7)
Make a mental picture to remember the word.	28.5% (43)	66.9% (101)	4.6% (7)
Use rhymes to remember new words.	27.8% (42)	62.9% (95)	9.3% (14)
Use flashcards to remember new words.	21.2% (32)	63.6% (96)	15.2% (23)
Act out new words.	26.5% (40)	66.2% (100)	7.3% (11)
Review English lessons often.	22.5% (34)	70.9% (107)	6.6% (10)
Remember the location of words on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	27.2% (41)	66.2% (100)	6.6% (10)

Table 2 shows the memory strategies that the students used in ESL learning. The results are divided into three sections, 'Always', 'Sometimes', 'Never', where the students' frequency of language learning used is revealed. The highest percentage of memory strategy which is frequently used in English learning is 45% of the students always connect the sound and image to remember English words. It is then followed by 35.8% of the students always use new English words in a sentence. Another 31.8% of the students always think of the relationships between words they already know with the new English words they learn. Additionally, the majority of the students occasionally used memory strategies, where 70.9% sometimes review their English lessons often. Another 66.9% of the students sometimes make a mental picture to remember English words. On the contrary, there are percentages of students who never use any of the metacognitive strategies for their English learning strategy. 15.2% of the students never use flashcards to help them remember any English words, while another 9.3% of the students never use rhymes

to remember new words.

Table 3. Cognitive strategies used by the students in learning English

Cognitive Strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
Say or write new words several times.	27.2% (41)	69.5% (105)	3.3% (5)
Talk like native speakers.	35.8% (54)	55% (83)	9.3% (14)
Practice the sounds.	47% (71)	49% (74)	4% (6)
Use the words in different ways.	35.1% (53)	61.6% (93)	3.3% (5)
Start conversations in English.	28.5% (43)	65.6% (99)	6% (9)
Watch English TV shows or movies.	49% (74)	47.7% (72)	3.3% (5)
Read for pleasure.	35.1% (53)	60.3% (91)	4.6% (7)
Write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	27.2% (41)	68.8% (104)	4% (6)
Skim and read carefully.	33.1% (50)	61.6% (93)	5.3% (8)
Look for similar words.	35.8% (54)	57.6% (87)	6.6% (10)
Try to find patterns.	30% (45)	65% (98)	5.3% (8)
Divide words into parts.	35.8% (54)	58.3% (88)	6% (9)
I try not to translate word for word.	30.5% (46)	61% (92)	8.6% (13)
Make summaries.	28.5% (43)	63% (95)	8.6% (13)

Table 3 shows the cognitive strategies used by the students in their English learning. The most frequent cognitive strategies used by the students are watching English TV shows or movies, 49%, and practice the sounds of new English words, 47%. In addition, the majority of students occasionally used cognitive strategies for their English learning. 69.5% of the students sometimes say or write English words several times, followed by 68.8% of the students sometimes write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English. However, 9.3% of the students never try to talk like native speakers. Other 8.6% of the students never try to translate English word for word, and never try to make summaries.

Table 4. Compensation strategies used by the students in learning english

Compensation Strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
Make guesses.	33.1% (50)	61.6% (93)	5.3% (8)
Use gestures.	24.5% (37)	70.9% (107)	4.6% (7)
Make up new words.	34.4% (52)	56.3% (85)	9.3% (14)
Read without looking up every word.	21.9% (33)	70.2% (106)	7.9% (12)
Try to guess what another person will say next.	33.1% (50)	60.9% (92)	6% (9)
Use words or phrases that mean the same.	36.4% (55)	57.6% (87)	6% (9)

Table 4 shows the compensation strategies that the students used for their English learning. The frequent compensation strategies used by the students are 36.4% always use English words or phrases that means the same if they could not find the exact words, and followed by 33.1% of the students always make guesses of the meaning and try to guess what another person will say next. To add, the majority of the students sometimes used the compensation strategies in learning English. The highest percentage for occasional compensation strategy used by the students is 70.9%, where the students sometimes use gestures to convey meanings. It is followed by 70.2% of the students sometimes read the English texts without looking up every word. Nevertheless, there are students who never use any f the compensation strategies for their English learning. The highest percentage is 9.3% of the students never try to make up new words and 7.9% of the students never try to read without looking up every word.

Table 5. Metacognitive strategies used by the students in learning english

Metacognitive Strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
Find ways to use English.	37.7% (57)	57.6% (87)	4.6% (7)
Notice English mistakes and improve.	44.4% (67)	52.3% (79)	3.3% (5)
Pay attention when someone is speaking.	43.7% (66)	51.7% (78)	4.6% (7)
Try to find out how to be a better learner.	40.4% (61)	58.3% (88)	1.3% (2)
Plan schedule to have enough time to study.	25.2% (38)	67.5% (102)	7.3% (11)

Look for people to talk in English.	37.7% (57)	57.6% (87)	4.6% (7)
Look for opportunities to read in English.	34.4% (52)	62.3% (94)	3.3% (5)
Have clear goals to improve English skills.	33.8% (51)	61% (92)	5.3% (8)
Think about the progress in learning English.	37.7% (57)	57.6% (87)	4.6% (7)

Table 5 shows the metacognitive strategies used by the students for their English learning. The most frequent metacognitive strategy used by the students is 44.4% of the students always notice their English mistakes and try to improve based on it. It is followed by 43.7% of the students always pay attention when someone is speaking using English. To add, the result shows that the majority of students occasionally used metacognitive strategies for their English learning. The highest percentage is 67.5% of the students plan their learning schedule in order to have enough time to study English. It is followed by 62.3% of the students sometimes look for opportunities to read English materials. However, 7.3% of the students never try to plan their learning schedule to study English and 5.3% of the students never have clear goals in their mind to improve English skills.

Table 6. Affective strategies used by the students in learning english

Affective Strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
Try to relax when feeling afraid of using English.	35.1% (53)	61% (92)	4% (6)
Encourage myself to speak English even when afraid of making a mistake.	34.4% (52)	60.3% (91)	5.3% (8)
Give a reward or treat myself.	25.8% (39)	63% (95)	11.3% (17)
Notice if I am tense or nervous when studying or using English.	26.5% (40)	65% (98)	8.6% (13)
Write down feelings in a dairy.	22.5% (34)	64.2% (97)	13.2% (20)
Talk to someone about how I feel when learning English.	29.8% (45)	63% (95)	7.3% (11)

Table 6 shows the affective strategies used by the students in learning English. The most common affective strategy used by the student is 35.1% always try to relax when they feel afraid of using English. It is followed by 34.4% of the students always encourage themselves to speak in English even when they are afraid of making mistakes. The result shows that the majority of students sometimes used affective strategies in learning English. The highest percentage is 65% of the students sometimes notice that if they feel tense or nervous when studying or using English. It is followed by 64.2% of the students sometimes write down their feelings in a diary. On the contrary, 13.2% of the students never try to write down their feelings in a diary, and another 11.3% never give treat or reward to themselves when they achieve something while learning English.

Table 7. Social strategies used by the students in learning english

Social Strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
Ask to slow down or to say it again.	42.4% (64)	54.3% (82)	3.3% (5)
Ask English speakers to correct me.	33.8% (51)	61.6% (93)	4.6% (7)
Practice English with other students.	31.8% (48)	64.2% (97)	4% (6)
Ask for help.	33.1% (50)	62.3% (94)	4.6% (7)
Ask questions in English.	33.1% (50)	64.2% (97)	2.6% (4)
Learn about English culture.	33.1% (50)	60.3% (91)	6.6% (10)

Table 7 shows the social strategies used by the students in learning English. The usual social strategy used by the students is 42.4% always ask to slow down or request the other person to say it again in order to comprehend the meaning of the conversation. It is followed by another social strategy where 33.8% of the students always ask English speakers to correct them if they are making any mistakes. Besides that, the majority of the students sometimes used all the social strategies for learning English. The highest percentage is 64.2% of the students sometimes practice English with other students and they sometimes ask questions in English. It is followed by 62.3% of the students sometimes ask for help from English lecturers or speakers. However, 6.6% of the students never try to learn about English culture and another 4.6% of the students never ask English speakers to correct them and never ask help from English speakers.

Overall, the present study asked the question: What are the polytechnic students' preferences of the English language learning strategies? After the analysis of data, it was discovered that the polytechnic students' have their own preference for English language learning strategies based on the six categories listed by Oxford (1990). The results for memory strategies exposed that the students prefer to connect the sound and image to remember English words, use new English words in a sentence, think of the relationships between words they already know with the new English words the learn, review their English lessons often, and make a mental picture to remember English words. Next, the findings for cognitive strategies revealed that the students prefer

to watch English TV shows or movies, practice the sounds of new English words, say or write the English words several times, and write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English. Afterward, compensation strategies revealed that the students prefer to use English words or phrases that means the same if they could not find the exact words, make guesses of the meaning, try to guess what another person will say next, use gestures to convey meanings, read the English texts without looking up every word.

Then, for metacognitive strategies, the students always notice their English mistakes and try to improve based on it, pay attention when someone is speaking using English, plan their learning schedule in order to have enough time to study English, and look for opportunities to read English materials. The findings for affective strategies show that the students prefer to try to relax when they feel afraid of using English, encourage themselves to speak in English even when they are afraid of making mistakes, notice that if they feel tense or nervous when studying or using English, and write down their feelings in a diary. Finally, the findings for social strategies revealed that they prefer to ask to slow down or request the other person to say it again in order to comprehend the meaning of the conversation, ask English speakers to correct them if they are making any mistakes, practice English with other students, ask questions in English, and ask for help from English lecturers or speakers. The findings will help the English language lecturers to plan in terms of selecting learning materials, implementing oral activities, and learning tasks (Yusri et al., 2013).

Implications and Conclusion

The current study was carried out on 151 students of a polytechnic in Malaysia studying diploma in various fields. It was discovered that the students use an acceptable amount of the number of strategies from the overall 50 strategies listed in SILL. Thus, the English language lecturers and educators should take the information gathered from this study to direct their efforts in promoting the English language learning activities which suit the students' English language learning strategies that they prefer. This will help the students to learn better and eventually helps them to improve their English language skills.

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