

A LEARNING STRATEGY PROFILE OF UNDERGRADUATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN A PUBLIC TERTIARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to provide a profile of the language learning strategies used by undergraduate students who were taking an English course at a public tertiary educational institution in Penang, Malaysia. The Strategy Inventory for Learning Version 7 (SILL) was used to obtain the data. Research questions were formulated concerning the profile of students' language learning strategies. Results of the study indicated significant differences in the variables investigated. Analysis of the results also revealed that there was a relationship between levels of proficiency, gender and language learning strategies.

Keywords: Language Learning, Language Learning Strategies, Proficiency, Gender, Achievement, Tertiary Education.

1.0 Introduction

When learning a language, learners make use of conscious steps or actions to help them acquire the language. These steps or behaviours are strategies to help them acquire and store information in order to be proficient or competent in a language. The term 'language' is used to indicate whatever the language being learned, whether it is a first, second or foreign language for the learner. According to Nisbet and Shucksmith (1986), "strategies are the processes that underlie performance in thinking tasks". Oxford (1990) defines language strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations." She considers language learning strategies as tools for active, self-directed involvement which is essential for communicative competence. Learning strategies as defined by Wenden (1991) are "mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so". Oxford (1990:9) states that the use of language learning strategies is aimed towards the development of communicative competence. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) state that strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement that are required in order to develop second language communicative ability.

Numerous studies on learning strategies have been conducted and Oxford (1993) reports on studies carried out in the United States, Canada, South America and Asia. Studies have also attempted to examine the relationship between language learning strategies and success in language learning and have reported varied results. Studies state that the conscious use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency and that successful language learners tend to select strategies according to the language task (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Thompson & Rubin, 1993). Other studies have also reported the use of different strategies by effective learners. It was discovered that high-achieving students used a variety of language learning strategies more frequently than low-achieving students (Green & Oxford, 1995).

In a study by Ehrman and Oxford (1995), it was found that successful students preferred to use cognitive strategies more frequently in their study. Vann and Abraham (1990) observed that learning strategies are also employed by unsuccessful language learners however these learners were unable to apply appropriate strategies to their task.

Many studies have discovered that the success in learning a language also depends among others, on the strategies which the learner consciously or unconsciously employs in the learning process (Chamot, 1987). In an overview of research into strategy training, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) found differences in the use of strategies between more effective learners and less effective learners. They found that the more effective learners, as categorized by their teachers, use strategies more frequently and use a greater variety of strategies than those who were considered less effective learners by their teachers. Many studies of second language learning (e.g. Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1990; Park, 1997; Wharton, 2000; Griffiths & Parr, 2001) have reported how successful learners seem to use a wider variety of language learning strategies than unsuccessful learners. Oxford (1990) reported that second language learners tend to use 'larger' and 'more divergent' strategies than foreign language learners. Several studies (e.g. Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Purpura, 1997; Cohen, 1998; Wharton, 2000; Bruen, 2001; Shen, 2005) have revealed that selecting appropriate strategies could enhance the learners' performance of second language learning. Wharton (2000) noted that the use of different types and numbers of strategies might depend on the characteristics and setting in which learning occurs and the language task to be completed. Therefore the choices of strategies used by second language learners play an important role in second language learning.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been presented in categories. Rubin (1987) identifies three types of strategies used by learners that contribute directly or indirectly to language learning. The strategies are Learning strategies, Communication strategies and Social strategies. O' Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzares, Kupper and Russo (1985) have more specific categories: Metacognitive, Cognitive, and Social Mediation. Oxford (1990) divides language learning strategies into two main classes: direct and indirect. These classes are further grouped into six categories. The six categories are: Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social. According to Oxford, Metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their learning. Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence while Social strategies lead to increased interaction with the target language. Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies learners use to make sense of their learning, Memory strategies are those used for storage of information, and Compensation strategies help learners to overcome knowledge gaps to continue the communication.

2.2 Gender

Research shows that there are different variables which influence the use, frequency and choice of language learning strategies used by learners for language learning. One of the variables that has been studied has focused on gender (e.g., Oxford, 1993; Oxford, Young, Ito & Sumrall, 1993; Young & Oxford, 1997). Researchers disagree whether gender should be included in any study of strategy use. Studies however have shown that there are differences between male and female learners. These studies have found that gender can have a significant impact on how learners learn a language.

Studies on gender and strategy use found that female learners use language learning strategies more frequently than male learners (e.g., Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996). Female learners employ more learning strategies or employ strategies more effectively (Erhman & Oxford, 1989; Nyikos, 1990; Oxford, 1994; Sheorey, 1999). Oxford and Nyikos (1989), who looked at the strategies used by university students, concluded that gender differences had a "profound influence" on strategy use, and that females used strategies more frequently than males.

In a study conducted on adult learners, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) reported greater strategy use by female students than male students. They found that females showed a significant advantage in *general strategies*, *authentic language use*, *searching for and communicating meaning* and *self-management*. In Malaysia, in a study conducted by Embi (2000) on the language learning strategies among secondary students who were studying English showed that the overall use of language learning strategies among female students was more frequent than male students.

On the other hand, Tercanlioglu (2004) in a study of how gender influences choice of learning strategies among Turkish students reported that male students use more strategies. This finding is inconsistent with the findings of other studies regarding gender differences and strategy use. The explanation for this result may be that in the male-dominated Turkish society, female students may have lower self-esteem in reporting the strategies they use.

Learners' cultural background and the educational settings in which learners learn the language may influence the strategy use by males and females (Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Green & Oxford,

1995). Green and Oxford (1995) observed that "...gender difference trends in strategy use are quite pronounced within and across cultures".

2.3 Level of Proficiency

A study by Green and Oxford (1995) looked at patterns of variation in strategy use by learners at different levels of proficiency. The researchers found a significant relationship between strategy use and language learning success. They found that the active use of the target language with a strong emphasis on practice in naturalistic situations was the most important factor in the development of proficiency in a second language. They concluded that the active use of strategies helped learners achieve competence.

Park (1997) investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency among Korean university students. The findings in the study showed a significant relationship between SILL learning strategies and English proficiency, as measured by a practice version of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Students who used more language learning strategies achieved higher TOEFL scores. In her study of strategies used by successful and less successful schoolchildren in Sarawak, Lau (2006) concluded that successful learners use a wider variety of strategies. Wu (2007) conducted a study on the use of language learning strategies by students of different levels of proficiency. It was concluded that students with higher English proficiency levels used language learning strategies more frequently than those with lower proficiency levels. The strategies that they frequently used were Cognitive, Metacognitive, and Social strategies.

3.0 Background of study

3.1 English Language Programmes in USM

English courses are offered at Malaysian universities to prepare students for academic tasks required by the various disciplines and also for social purposes. The School of Languages, Literacies and Translation at Universiti Sains Malaysia offers English courses to undergraduates who are required to take at least two of those courses before they graduate. The English course encompassed the instruction of four key skills that is reading, writing, speaking and listening. Undergraduates are required to take these English courses to improve their proficiency in the language. Students are assessed on different types of oral tasks such as individual presentations, group discussions, and interviews. They are also tested on their ability to write essays and to answer reading comprehension questions based on a passage.

3.2 Statement of the Problem

English is considered as a second language in Malaysia and it is an important language for undergraduates to acquire knowledge as it is a language used in academia. English language proficiency in Malaysia has been in a steady state of decline and efforts have been made by the Government to address this problem. The Malaysian Ministry of Education is proposing that English be made a compulsory subject to pass at public universities (The Star, 2014). Studies conducted among undergraduates show that many of them lack general proficiency in English despite being exposed to the language for at least 11 years in school. Studies of successful language learners and unsuccessful language learners have indicated differences in the learning strategies used. Thus, the researchers would like to provide a profile of the strategies used and to utilize the information in order to train students in the use of the different strategies for successful language learning.

3.3 Objectives of study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the strategies used among Malaysian university students and their frequency. The study also investigated how gender influences the choice of second language learning strategies and the relationship between strategies used and students' language proficiency as measured by *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) examination, or the Malaysian Certificate of Education English examination result. The *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) or the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination is a national examination taken by all fifth-year secondary school students in Malaysia. It is set and examined by the Malaysian Examination Board. A high score indicates that a student has a high level of language proficiency whereas a low score indicates that a student has a low level language proficiency.

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. investigate the language learning strategies used by students.
- ii. investigate how often these strategies are used.
- iii. examine the relationship between gender and language learning strategies.
- iv. examine the relationship between levels of English proficiency and language learning strategies.

3.4 Research Questions

The study was designed to investigate the following questions:

- i. What are the language learning strategies of the students?
- ii. How often do the students use the strategies?
- iii. Is there a relationship between language learning strategies and gender?
- iv. Is there a relationship between language learning strategies and English language proficiency, as measured by *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) examination, or the Malaysian Certificate of Education English examination results?

3.5 Significance of study

The findings from this study will provide a profile of the language learning strategies of Malaysian undergraduate university students. This study will contribute more information about students' second language learning strategies especially in the Malaysian educational setting. It is hoped that the findings will help teachers to choose strategies that students should be exposed to in order to become more proficient in the English language.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Participants

A total of 33 students who were in their final year at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) participated in this study. The age of the students ranged from 20 to 24. There were 12 males (36.4%) and 21 females (63.6%) in the sample. The participants were students taking or have taken a compulsory credit-earning English Proficiency course at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

4.2 Research instrument

The main data collection method was the administration of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7 questionnaire that was administered towards the end of the semester. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990) is a survey instrument used to elicit information about the strategies that a learner uses to learn a second language and to identify the strategies of successful language

learners. There are fifty individual second language strategy items within six broad categories of second language learning strategies. The categories are

- i. remembering more effectively
- ii. using all your mental processes
- iii. compensating for missing knowledge
- iv. organising and evaluating your learning
- v. managing your emotions
- vi. learning with others.

'Remembering more effectively' is a memory-related strategy which helps learners link one second language item or concept with another but does not necessarily involve deep understanding. 'Using all mental processes' enables the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways, e.g., through reasoning, analysis, note-taking and synthesising. 'Organizing and evaluating learning' is a metacognitive strategy which identifies one's own preferences and needs, planning, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success. 'Compensating for missing knowledge' helps make up for missing knowledge. 'Managing emotions' helps to identify one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk, and helps learners manage their emotions and motivation level. 'Learning with others' enables the learner to learn via interaction with others and to understand the target culture.

The SILL was selected for this study because its Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients range from 0.89 to 0.98 in various studies. It is also widely used in educational research because it provides a comprehensive classification of learning strategies.

4.3 Data analysis

The data analysis techniques used in this study are descriptive analysis and inferential analysis.

Inferential analysis

Correlational studies were used in order to determine the relationship between the variables. They were used to identify whether there was any significant correlation between the variables. Simple regression was also used to explain the variance in each variable.

5.0 Findings

5.1 Reliability

A reliability analysis was conducted on the six variables in this study. Results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

Cronbach's alphas for all factors scored more than 0.55 which indicated a high reliability of the instrument used.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Factor	Number of Items	Alpha
Remembering more effectively	9	0.5942
Mental Processes	14	0.6781
Compensating for missing knowledge	6	0.6830
Organizing evaluating learning	9	0.8333
Managing emotions	6	0.7059
Learning with others	6	0.7703

5.2 Means of Language Learning Strategies

Table 2 illustrates the mean for each category of language learning strategies and the respondents' overall means.

Table 2: Means for each category of language learning strategies

Factor	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Remembering more effectively	33	1.56	3.67	2.8384	.4419
Mental process	33	2.36	4.36	3.3571	.4348
Compensating for missing knowledge	33	2.33	4.67	3.3081	.6083
Organizing/evaluating learning	33	1.89	4.33	3.2424	.6025
Managing emotions	33	1.67	4.17	3.0909	.5953
Learning with others	33	1.17	4.50	3.1566	.7300

In summary, the overall means show that the respondents sometimes used the language learning strategies. They were medium means on all six categories of the learning strategies.

Table 3: Means for each part of the strategies

Language Learning Strategy	Mean Score
Mental process	3.3571
Compensating for missing knowledge	3.3081
Organizing/evaluating learning	3.2424
Learning with others	3.1566
Managing emotions	3.0909
Remembering more effectively	2.8384

It can be seen from Table 3 that the respondents used all of the six strategies in learning English at medium average. The overall means show that the respondents sometimes used language learning strategies. The strategy that was used the most was mental process followed by compensating for missing knowledge, organizing/evaluating learning, learning with others, managing emotions and remembering more effectively as the least strategy used.

5.3 Frequency of Language Learning Strategies

Table 4 shows the frequency of language learning strategies used by the students.

Table 4: Frequency of Overall Average of Language Learning Strategies

Language Learning Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Usually use	9	27.3
Sometimes use	21	63.6
Generally not used	3	9.1

Based on the table, only 27.3% of the respondents use language learning strategies at high frequency, 63.6% at medium frequency while 9.1% at low frequency.

5.4 Students' Language Learning Strategies and Gender

To gain further insight into the relationship between each of the six categories of strategies, a Pearson's Correlation was conducted to correlate between each one of the six categories and gender. The correlation coefficient between language learner strategies and gender are tabulated in Table 5.

Table 5: Correlation between Language Learning Strategies and Gender

Variable	Language learning strategies
Gender	0.6530*

Note: *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The table indicates the coefficient which achieved a level of statistical significance. From the results, it is evident that there was a significant relationship between Language Learning Strategies and Gender.

Table 6: Correlation between each part of the Language Learning Strategy and Gender

Part	Strategies	Gender	SPM English
A	Remembering more effectively	0.652**	0.423*
C	Compensating for missing knowledge	0.441*	
D	Organizing/Evaluating learning	0.568**	
E	Managing emotions	0.655**	
F	Learning with others	0.398*	0.656*

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 – tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 – tailed)

The overall mean score by the students on the six categories of the language learning strategies are illustrated in Table 6. As can be seen from the table, strategies A and E showed a positive significant relationship with gender. Strategies C, D and F also showed a positive relationship with gender.

In general, the mean score of female students' language learning strategies was higher than the male students. This is because the higher the mean, the higher the frequency use of strategies. A t-test was conducted in order to determine the significant difference for the mean score of female and male students' language learning strategies. The result is tabulated in Table 7.

Table 7: Frequency of strategy use according to gender

Learning Strategies	Gender		T-test for equality of mean
	N	Mean	
Remembering more effectively	Male : 12 Female: 21	2.50 3.10	0.000***
Compensating for missing knowledge	Male : 12 Female: 21	2.95 3.51	0.010*
Organizing/ Evaluating Learning	Male: 12 Female: 21	2.79 3.49	0.001**
Managing Emotions	Male: 12 Female: 21	2.58 3.38	0.000***
Learning with Others	Male: 12 Female: 21	2.77 3.40	0.022*

Note : * Significance level = 0.05

** Significance level = 0.005

*** Significance level = 0.0001

As indicated by the table, there is a significant difference in the mean of the language learning strategies between male and female students. The latter use significantly more strategies such as 'remembering more effectively' (3.1, $p < 0.000$), 'compensating for missing language' (3.5, $p < 0.010$), 'organizing/evaluating learning' ((3.5, $p < 0.010$), 'managing emotions' (3.4, $p < 0.000$) and 'learning with others' (3.4, $p < 0.022$) at medium to high frequency. In contrast, the male students preferred to use the strategies at low to medium frequency.

5.5 Students' Language Learning Strategies and Level of Proficiency

A Pearson's Correlation was conducted to correlate between each one of the six categories and level of English language proficiency as measured by *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) Examination, or the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination English result. The correlation coefficient between language learning strategies and level of proficiency is tabulated in Table 8.

Table 8: Correlation between Language Learning Strategies and Level of English Language Proficiency

Variable	Language Learning Strategies
Students' SPM English results (Level of language proficiency)	0.3790*

Note: *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 8 indicates the coefficient which achieved a level of statistical significance. From the result, it is evident that there is a significant relationship between Language Learning Strategies and Level of Proficiency.

Table 9: Correlation between each part of the Language Learning Strategy and Level of Language Proficiency

Part	Strategies	Students' SPM results
A	Remembering more effectively	0.423*
C	Compensating for missing knowledge	
D	Organizing/Evaluating learning	
E	Managing emotions	0.656**
F	Learning with others	

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 - tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 - tailed)

The overall mean score by the students on the six categories of the language learning strategies are illustrated in Table 10. As can be seen from the table, strategies A and E show a positive significant relationship with level of proficiency.

The implication established from the results of the statistical analysis shows that only 'remembering more effectively' and 'managing emotions' have a significant relationship with the level of proficiency which is students' SPM English results. Students who had high scores in SPM English had lower means in the strategy of 'Remembering more effectively' and 'Managing emotions' than students with lower scores in SPM English. It can be concluded that the higher the mean, the higher is the frequency in the use of the language learning strategies.

A t-test was conducted in order to determine the significant difference for students with high scores in SPM English and students with low scores in the way they learn English and this is indicated in Table 10. The distribution of the rating of 'remembering more effectively' and 'managing emotions' among students with low scores was different than the students with high scores. It can be concluded that students with low scores preferred to use these two strategies more frequently rather than students with high scores. However, both students with low scores and students with high scores preferred to use 'mental process', 'compensating for missing knowledge', 'organizing/evaluating learning' and 'learning with others' at high medium frequency (see Table 2).

The students having high scores in English in their SPM examination had lower means for 'remembering more effectively' and 'managing emotions' than the students who had low scores. Based on the result of the means as indicated in Table 10 (the higher the mean, the higher the frequency of use of Strategies) the low score students tended to use these two strategies at a high frequency rather than the high score students.

Table: 10 Students' Language Learning Strategy by level of proficiency

Learning Strategies	Level of Proficiency		T-test for equality of mean
	N	Mean	
	Students' SPM results		
Remembering more Effectively	High score :19	2.655	0.005**
	Low score :13	3.094	
Managing emotions	High score : 19	2.842	0.005**
	Low score : 13	3.423	

Note :** Significant level at 0.01

High score: High language proficiency, Low score: Low language proficiency

6.0 Conclusions and Implications

This study shows that there are gender differences in the use of strategies. From the study, we can conclude that female students use different strategies more frequently than male students. This is consistent with the findings of most studies (e.g., Oxford, 1993; Oxford, Young, Ito & Sumrall, 1993; Young & Oxford, 1997; Mohamed Amin, 2000; Punithavalli, 2003). A positive relationship is found between 'remembering more effectively', 'compensating for missing knowledge', 'managing emotions', 'organizing and evaluating learning', 'learning with others' and gender. The strategy most frequently used is 'remembering more effectively'. Both males and females therefore use a variety of strategies.

Looking at the relationship between English proficiency, using SPM English results, and language learning strategies, a positive relationship is found with "remembering more effectively" and "managing emotions". From the means, we can conclude that those with low scores in SPM English or unsuccessful learners make use of learning strategies more frequently. This is inconsistent with the findings of studies regarding successful and unsuccessful learners (e.g., O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Green & Oxford, 1995; Wu, 2007).

The infrequent use of cognitive strategies in the language classes as reported in this study needs to be looked into. If good learning involves the high use of each of the strategy (Oxford, 1990; Oxford 1993; Rubin and Thompson, 1982), the low use of this category in the classroom can be problematic. In this respect, language teachers should be encouraged to motivate their students to use more cognitive strategies in their learning.

7.0 Limitations

The study is a preliminary study and the results may not reflect that of the whole population of university students. The sample group in this research might not be entirely representative of all Malaysian undergraduates studying at institutions of higher learning. Some students may not report their strategy use and as noted in studies there may be other external factors that might affect the results attained from this research. Misinterpretation of the questionnaire items can also lead to limitations in the results obtained. Further research could be done using a larger sample and with more variables such as cultural backgrounds and educational settings.

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