

Exploring the Challenges of Language Learning Strategies in Learning the English Language

Nurzawanah Rohaizat^{1,2}, Azlina Abdul Aziz²

¹General Studies Department, Politeknik Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah, 06000 Jitra,

²Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi

Email: nurzawanah@polimas.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i8/13884>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i8/13884

Published Date: 16 August 2022

Abstract

Students' mastery of the English language is a major concern despite the various strategies implemented whether at primary and secondary levels or in higher institutions. The purpose of the current research is to examine the challenges encountered in instructional learning activities when learners are required to apply the language learning strategies in learning English. The goal of the research is to identify the barriers and formulate solutions that can be implemented to achieve the learning goals. This qualitative research approach was conducted by gathering data from commerce students in a polytechnic through a semi-structured interview. Based on the thematic analysis conducted, findings have shown that the students are highly burdened by anxiety in their attempt to integrate LLS into learning the English language and lack motivation. The implication of this study bridges a gap in knowledge regarding the challenges in learning the English language by providing insights into ways in which the use of LLS in polytechnics can be improved. Therefore, educators should understand the underlying problems that may contribute to the reduction in morale for a better language learning process.

Keywords: Anxiety, Challenges, English as Second Language, Language Learning Strategies

Introduction

Strategy constitutes an important factor in the implementation of any teaching and learning programs aimed at achieving gainful learning objectives. Many studies have been conducted regarding language learning strategies (LLS) at the first and second language levels (Habók and Magyar, 2018). Studies on learning strategies in Second Language (SL) have emerged from the need to determine the learner-centred models of teaching which is agreed by Lavasani and Faryadres (2011). Others looked into researching skill-based learning strategies (Al Raqqad et al., 2019; Raw & Ismail, 2021; Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021). The emphasis on LLS in English is to empower learners to acquire competence in communication skills that enable them to take part in both local and international learning and occupational programs. Students in polytechnics in most English-speaking countries are more likely to undergo English language courses to meet their learning needs at the local and international

levels. In the case of Malaysia, a significant number of students start learning English at the elementary level while those in polytechnics tend to take three hours of English courses on a weekly basis in the first, third, and fifth semesters and are also required to pass the national-level standardised tests before receiving their diplomas. English is also used as a testing subject prior to admission of students into Universities in Malaysia. Students who desire to undergo further studies at the degree or higher levels are required to take the MUET test as one of the requirements prior to admission. However, there are many programs in which English courses are being designed as components of the programs despite English not being the official language at the polytechnic level.

In spite of the requirement that LLS should be provided to college and polytechnic students in Malaysia, studies show that there are many barriers encountered in the process of its use. These challenges are encountered by both learners and teachers in achieving effective communication, interaction, coordinating, and performing learning activities such as exercises and tests (Aziz & Shah, 2020). The challenges experienced during English courses result from the fact that many learners have better knowledge of their first language or mother tongue and tend to learn and interact better despite the requirement of most institutions having policies of using English as an instructional and learning language. There is a continuous realisation of the direct association between the achievement of academic objectives and social aspects of learning (Kussin et al., 2018). Teachers encounter the challenge of scaffolding both English speaking children and LLS in learning scenarios and building relationships that address their learning needs inclusively. Other factors that have been necessary to examine include the impacts of cultural factors on the effectiveness of learning outcomes among LLS when they use English as the standard language of interaction, communication, and learning.

The purpose of the current research is to;

- examine the challenges encountered in instructional learning activities when learners are required to apply the language learning strategies in learning English language.
- bridge a gap in knowledge regarding the challenges in learning the English language by providing insights into ways in which the use of LLS in polytechnics can be improved.
- identify the challenges encountered in the use of LLS as an instructional language among commerce students in a polytechnic.

Literature Review

Language Learning Strategies

LLS is any specific action applied by learners to achieve learning objectives (Aziz & Shah, 2020). A different definition of LLS is a set of strategies and actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, self-directed, more effective, and easy to transfer to different situations. They also include devices and techniques used for the purpose of gaining knowledge and achieving learning objectives. The significance of consciousness has been identified as a factor that provides a distinction of strategies from non-strategic processes. Learners have the knowledge of their use of learning strategies with the main objective of having better knowledge and understanding of a language (Kussin et al., 2018). The two main categories of LLS include direct and indirect strategies. Direct learning strategies include learning strategies that focus on reinforcing memory, cognitive skills, compensation strategies, whereas indirect learning strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Learners involved in second language acquisition use both L1 and L2 learning

strategies. These strategies are effective in improving the students' competence in the use of L2. Some of the skills acquired during LLS studies include retrieval, rehearsal skills, and communication strategies (Aziz & Shah, 2020). The contributing factor to the broad nature of LLS definition is that it incorporates actions focusing on improving the learner's competence in the use of a language as well as those that may lead to the achievement of language skills but do not have learning as the main objective. While the explicit objective of LLS is to assist learners to improve their present knowledge of a language of focus, the primary goal of LLS is to employ the learner's present language skills in the study of a second language.

The effectiveness of LLS as part of language acquisition (Sani & Ismail, 2021) has been impacted by the concept of language learning behaviours, which refers to the tendency of a learner to use the first language more frequently compared with the second language. Proactive language learning behaviour is more recommended in LLS because it improves the capacity of the learner to anticipate the challenges in the learning environment and respond to them in real-time (Kussin et al., 2018). Recent findings suggest that successful acquisition of LLS skills was majorly dependent on the extent to which learners prepared for and answered questions, had the courage to communicate irrespective of the circumstances and were oriented towards the use of songs (Sani & Ismail, 2021). A different perspective suggests that second language learning is not limited to grammatical competence, but other types of competence such as communication competence. In order to achieve better communication competence, learners must gain knowledge of the cultural and social aspects of a language as means of discerning variations between the first and second language (Aziz & Shah, 2020). The effectiveness of learning strategies is dependent on the extent to which learners participate in authentic communication in order to achieve communicative competence. Some of the behaviours associated with good language learning include willingness to guess, willingness to communicate, and the ability to identify forms and patterns in a target language.

Challenges in Utilising Language Learning Strategies

Language anxiety is the feeling or tension and apprehension experienced by learners in the classroom. However, language anxiety is a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to the classroom language learning process. (Darmi & Albion, 2013). Nor et. Al (2019) reported that ESL learners hesitated and tended to feel anxious to speak English with their lecturers and friends in or outside the classroom because they are concerned about making grammatical mistakes and felt embarrassed of their low language proficiency. This is due to the negative physical response, such as a smirk and pout, that they received from others when learners spoke incorrectly.

Ali et al (2011) found out that using English could expose some students to undesirable experiences, thus, dampening their enthusiasm to communicate in English. Regardless of these challenges, English for Specific Purpose continues to exist in Malaysia. What needs to be done is developing effective English language learning strategies that reclaim the confidence of Malaysian students and inspire them to develop likeness for English so that it can enable them to interact in the international communication arena.

Based on the observation by Balci (2017), previous studies have concentrated on the factors that affect language learning strategies among students and the relationship between

learning styles and language learning strategy use. Nonetheless, inadequate attention has been paid to the factors that influence English learning strategies among tertiary students particularly those from English for Specific (ESP) backgrounds. The practises of teaching, a unilateral focus on national examinations, low levels of motivation, negative attitudes of the learners towards English language learning and an environment that is not conducive for learning the English language are some of the factors that continue to undermine the English language acquisition in Malaysia. The element of motivation is pegged on Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-regulation, which is founded on the belief that neither externally stimuli nor inner forces drive a person, but a triadic interaction among cognitive, behaviour and other personal factors, and environmental factors.

Research Method

Research Approach

The research approach to be used in this study will be qualitative research. In a qualitative data collection process, data collection is achieved by examining the opinions, observations, knowledge, and experiences of respondents. Qualitative research design enables the collection of subjective opinions of respondents with respect to a research question (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The reason for the selection of qualitative research is that the researchers will be able to explore information regarding exploring the challenges of language learning strategies in learning English among commerce students in Malaysian polytechnics.

Sampling

Based on three types of polytechnics in Malaysia (premier status polytechnics, conventional status polytechnics, and metro status polytechnics), this research looked at the conventional polytechnic which is located in Kedah where students take several courses for professional qualifications. This location is selected due to the limited number of research focusing at this area. The courses offered in these polytechnics include engineering, tourism and hospitality, and business studies.

This study employed a purposive sampling, which was done according to the researchers' judgement as according to the suitability of respondents to answer questions relating to the research topic (Etikan et al., 2016). 90 samples were selected among students undertaking commerce courses in the selected polytechnic, who gave consent at participating and providing information according to their levels of experience and knowledge. This study focused entirely on the polytechnic students with similar characteristics of struggling to learn the English language. The sample selected was specific because only students without proficiency in the English language were included. The sample was distributed among students of different ages, races, ethnicity, background, and gender. The reason for concentrating on students willing to learn English as a second language is that literature has presented the importance of LLS, and the current research is developed to address the current challenges.

Table 1 summarises the demographics of the samples interviewed. 70% of the participants were between the ages of 18 to 19 years, while 30% were above 20 years but below 22 years of age. All the participants are currently in their tertiary level of education and had already completed their primary and secondary levels. The majority of the

participants (60%) spoke the Malay language, while the rest were from other languages such as Mandarin and Tamil.

Table 1

Demographic Details of the participant

Participants	10
Male	50%
Female	50%
Age (18 -19 years)	70%
Above 20-22 years	30%
Education level	Secondary School

Interview Protocol

Interview questions were adapted from the article “Language Learning Strategies Use and Challenges Faced by Adult Arab Learners of Finnish as a Second Language in Finland.” The article by Naif and Saad (2017) utilised interview methods to investigate the challenges that Arab learners face in acquiring Finnish as a second language (FSL). FSL knowledge allows the students to acquire Finland citizenship and employment. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain experiences, thoughts, and opinions regarding the challenges they encounter while using LLS in learning the English language. The interview is one of the methods widely used in collecting data in qualitative research. Therefore, to achieve the objective of assessing the difficulties faced by Malaysian polytechnic students when using LLS, interviews were conducted to collect accurate and precise data from first-hand experiences. The interview scripts were obtained from the respondents.

Importantly caution should be considered while using scripted interview data because it might have lost its originality during the process of editing and omission of critical details. From the studies collected by Gill and Baillie (2018), the authors found that interviews are important methods that enable the researchers to collect data regarding the experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and motivation of the participants. Interviews conducted by virtual methods such as telephone are proffered compared to face-to-face interviews. Such methods enable the participants to collect data from participants located in different geographical regions. Therefore, in this case, the interviews were audio-recorded and then written in scripts and arranged for the purpose of analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process will involve an online interview in which an online meeting link will be sent to the respondents who will agree to take part in the study. The interview will be semi-structured in nature with both structured and unstructured questions. The data collection duration will be four weeks to find the best time that suits both parties. Out of a

sample of 90 students, 10 agreed to participate in the interview while the rest cited, they could not participate because they were having exams while others were not confident with the interview method. The participants were interviewed to extract the challenges and difficulties they encountered during their language learning strategies of learning the English Language.

The research will be conducted by observing various ethical considerations by obtaining permission from the institution to interview the respondents. Other ethical considerations were included in the need to ensure the election of respondents is done on a voluntary basis without coercion of the participants to take part in the study, the anonymity of respondents during data collection, and ensuring the confidentiality of the data collection process until the research is completed.

Data Analysis Procedure

A thematic data analysis technique was used in this study. Data was transcribed by converting the video recording into text format (Creswell, 2012). Iterative reading of the texts helps the researchers to create codes from the content of the responses. Similar codes will be combined to create themes that will be discussed in depth in the report. The researchers will analyse the data manually by organising the transcribed text along with the codes, memos, and findings into a project (Creswell, 2012). This will ease the process of coding, annotating, and comparing sections of information.

Findings were reported using a narrative discussion technique, which summarises the findings from qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2012). A detailed summary of each theme is presented with reference to the content from qualitative interviews content and literature. Interpretation of the findings will involve the researchers forming larger meanings about the aspect of willingness to communicate and interact in electronic educational platforms based on personal views, comparison with experience and past studies.

Findings and Discussion

There are several themes that emerged from the interviews. By analysing the interview transcripts based on the generated initial codes which were embedded among the respondent's answers, researchers were able to divide them into different specific categories accordingly. This step is crucial as it will determine the most suitable themes for the findings. In this situation, researchers had carefully reviewed the codes and found that some of them clearly matched into a theme. Various codes are connected to the challenges in utilising LLS which then are labelled with the most suitable themes. Table 2.1 and 2.2 illustrate the coding process and the themes obtained.

Table 2.1
Initial Coding Process

Codes	Themes
<i>I feel so low</i> <i>My heart beats so fast</i> <i>I am nervous</i> <i>I prefer to keep quiet</i> <i>My palms get sweaty</i>	Anxiety
<i>Not well encouraged</i> <i>Difficult</i> <i>I was excited...but not anymore</i>	Lack of Motivation
<i>Do not want to interact with others who are not very good</i> <i>No positive feedback</i> <i>Confusing to use</i> <i>Difficult to implement</i> <i>Challenging</i> <i>Hard to understand</i>	Lack of Communication and Difficulty in Grammar

Table 2.2
Themes Obtained from Interviews

Emergед Themes	Participants
Anxiety	A, B, D, E, G, H, I
Lack of motivation	E, F,
Lack of communication and difficulty in grammar	A, B, C, D, F, I, J

Anxiety, lack of motivation, the challenge in communication and grammar are the main factors that affect the urge of ESL students to learn English. Due to that, a section of the students cannot effectively incorporate the SSL strategies into the learning process and achieve the goal of learning English.

A. Anxiety

The results obtained from the interviews indicated that the students are highly burdened by anxiety in their attempt to integrate LLS into learning the English language. One of the participants said that:

“When I want to read anything in English, I feel that other students will laugh at me, and I feel so low that I cannot continue. Sometimes when I am in English class, I prefer to keep quiet, so I don’t make mistakes.

When the participant was asked about the feeling during the process of learning English, the participant mentioned that:

"I am worried thinking about other assignments that are more demanding."

Learning English is important in achieving success in their courses and taking part in occupational and international programs. Anxiety that emerges during the learning of language has been outlined by scholars. Oflaz (2019) argued that foreign language anxiety is one of the major factors that affect the language learning process. Anxiety can impede the acquisition of a new language and can increasingly cause extreme damage when a lack of motivation is involved. During the language learning process, students may think that they are likely to make mistakes while speaking in a language such as English. Such an attitude might decrease the desire of the students to understand the patterns of a different language. The feeling of tension or apprehension when a new language is introduced becomes a serious concern among foreign and other less exposed local students. Anxiety causes psychological effects such as trembling, high heart rates, feeling dizziness, sweats, and shaking that have high chances of reducing concentration (Oflaz, 2019). Therefore, anxiety has a negative influence on foreign language learning and, in turn, affects the academic achievement of the students. However, the coverage of this study was based on tertiary level students.

B. Lack of Motivation

Most of the students reported positive motivation while learning the English language. However, a low percentage reported a lack of motivation. One of the students said that:

"I am not well encouraged to learn the language since I was in school, and this has made it difficult for me to understand the words."

"Before I enrolled for the course, I was excited, driven by the desire to learn the language better, but I don't feel that anymore."

The role of motivation in influencing learners utilising the LLS in learning English has also been documented. Aziz and Shah (2020) mentioned motivation as a factor that propagates the learners in developing proficiency in the English language. Motivation affects the learning strategy used (Aziz & Shah, 2020). Lack of motivation affects the language learning process since it will reduce the necessary attention and the input required for a successful language acquisition process. Language teachers are encouraged to treat the students with patience and particularly focus on low-performing students by uplifting their standards. During the application of LLS, teachers should try and remove the barriers that could compromise the interests of learners in the English language. Aziz and Shah (2020) study is critical because it primarily focuses on the students in polytechnics. Kehing et al (2021) investigated the use of LLS in learning speaking skills and motivation levels among students in a polytechnic in Sarawak. Students who are motivated are willing to learn and practice communicating in a new language. Motivation is a critical factor in LLS and should not be lacking among the students. According to Kehing et al (2021), the ability of the learners to speak fluently depends on their levels of motivation. In other words, lack of motivation is likely to affect the fluency of language speaking.

C. Lack of Communication & Difficulty in Grammar

Lack of communication and difficulty in grammar are other challenges that were reported among the students. This outcome was confirmed by Aziz and Shah (2020) when the authors argued that challenges of learning a second language are not attributed to grammatical competence but also to communication competence. The participants cited several reasons why they face such challenges. Participant A mentioned that:

“Malay speakers who are better performing in English do not want to interact with others who are not very good at the language. Some rules used in English grammar are confusing and difficult to implement into practice.”

Student F mentioned that:

“I do not receive positive feedback when I direct a question to the students who are good in English.”

Lack of communication and difficulty in grammar is a challenge that affects several ESP students. The LLS exposed to the students should match their proficiency level. Learners have to pay attention to grammatical structure, vocabulary and be able to communicate effectively (Al-Jarf, 2021). However, while studying the English language, many students remain poor in developing their grammar and vocabulary. Lack of essential skills in comprehension and grammar reduces the chances of communicating with others or during professional activities. Students struggling with grammar and vocabulary should be supported and provided with opportunities to enhance language learning. Learning about grammar, vocabulary, and language of communication can be enhanced when students receive support from the first language speakers and teachers. Helping students to succeed in LLS areas on improving communication and grammar will facilitate the learning of English.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that students struggling to learn English as a second language encounter challenges that include low literacy levels, lack of communication and grammar development, lack of motivation, and anxiety. In the process, they are unable to grasp the important structures of the language, affecting their communication skills and reducing the chances of participating in international learning and occupational programs. Therefore, there is a need for critical measures that can help to encourage and provide better chances for the students to gain proficiency in the English language. First, educators should understand the underlying problems that may contribute to the reduction in morale and the development of negative attitudes towards English. For example, some issues that happened in the past while learning English and the nature of the families can be considered which can lead to the development of special LLS programs. Teachers should motivate and encourage the students to learn English. For example, teachers can reward best-performing students and continuously engage in programs to uplift underperforming students. This will ensure a smooth transition and reduce the gaps with their first language student counterparts.

The strength of this study is that it was based on exploring the challenges faced by students in incorporating LLS in the learning of the English language. Previous studies could not reveal such challenges but only concentrated on the need for knowledge in the English language. Furthermore, the study targeted polytechnic students, an area that has not been extensively explored because most studies have concentrated on university education.

Despite the strength of this study, some limitations are the study was carried out in a single region and using a small sample size. Therefore, it reduces the chances of generalisability or application in other contexts. Furthermore, the study was supported by previous studies that primarily concentrated on university students.

References

- Al-Jarf, R. (2021). Teaching English with Linguistic Landscapes to Saudi Students Studying Abroad. *Asian Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 4(3), 1-12.
- Al Raqqad, Y. M., Ismail, H. H., & Al Raqqad, K. M. (2019). The impact of reading strategies on EFL students: A research review. *International Journal of English, Literature and Social Sciences*, 4(6), 2042-2048. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.46.65>
- Aziz, S. N. S. M., & Shah, P. M. (2020). Language learning strategy (LLS) for English language learners in polytechnic. *Journal of Personalized Learning*, 3(1), 71-78.
- Carmines, E. G., & Zeller, R. A. (1979). Reliability and validity assessment. Sage publications.
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American journal of theoretical and applied statistics*, 5(1), 1-4.
- Gill, P., & Baillie, J. (2018). Interviews and focus groups in qualitative research: an update for the digital age. *British dental journal*, 225(7), 668-672.
- Habók A., & Magyar A. (2018) The Effect of Language Learning Strategies on Proficiency, Attitudes and School Achievement. *Front. Psychol.* 8:2358. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02358
- Jaikrishnan, S., & Ismail, H.H. (2021). A Review on Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used in Learning English as A Second Language. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(9), 297-309.
- Kehing, K. L., Suhaili, M. S., Mara, R. R., Kana, A. A., Ipan, D. A., Blaise, C. C., & Hashim, H. (2021). Engineering Students' Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and Their Motivation in Learning Speaking Skills.
- Kussin, H. J., Omar, A., & Kepol, N. (2018). Language Learning Strategies (LLS): Teachers' Notions and Practice. *Dinamika Ilmu*, 18(1), 107-120.
- Lavasani, M., & Faryadres, F. (2011). Language learning strategies and suggested model in adults processes of learning second language. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, pp.191-197.
- Naif, A. H., & Saad, N. S. M. (2017). Language Learning Strategies Use and Challenges Faced by Adult Arab Learners of Finnish as a Second Language in Finland. *English Language Teaching*, 10(4), 111-126.
- Nor, K. M., Razali, M. M., Talib, N., Ahmad, N., Sakarji, S. R., Saferdin, W. A. A. W. M., & Nor, A. M. (2019). Students' Problem in Learning English as A Second Language Among MDAB Students At UITM Malacca. *International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy, and Language*, 2(7), 01-12.
- Oflaz, A. (2019). The Effects of Anxiety, Shyness and Language Learning Strategies on Speaking Skills and Academic Achievement. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 8(4), 999-1011.
- Raw, S. D. M., & Ismail, H. H. (2021). Tracing Effectiveness and Challenges in Using Online Tools to Enhance Vocabulary Language Learning: A Review. 10(3), 938-952.
- Rutakumwa, R., Mugisha, J. O., Bernays, S., Kabunga, E., Tumwekwase, G., Mbonye, M., & Seeley, J. (2019). Conducting in-depth interviews with and without voice recorders: A comparative analysis. *Qualitative Research*, 20(5), 565-581.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884806>

Sani, S., & Ismail, H. H. (2021). Assessing the Use of Learning Strategies among Young Malaysian English as Second Language Learners. *Creative Education*, 12(9), 2124-2145. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2021.129163>.

Schoonenboom, J., & Johnson, R. B. (2017). How to construct a mixed methods research design. *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 69(2), 107-131.