

# Identifying Language Learning Strategies Used by Polytechnic ESL Learners in Enhancing Speaking Skills

Samantha Elesha Salambau<sup>1</sup>, Belinda Lai<sup>1</sup>, Gan Poh Xian<sup>1</sup>,  
Sara Ruran Fabian<sup>2</sup>, Harwati Hashim<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, <sup>2</sup>Department of General Studies,  
Politeknik, Mukah, Sarawak

Corresponding Authors Email: harwati@ukm.edu.mu

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## Abstract

One of the primary reasons for global learners to study a language is to communicate. The Malaysian Education Blueprint aspires to guarantee that every student has an equal chance to progress and become competent in English in order to meet the requirements of a globalised world. As a result, the English Language Course syllabus is designed to mould students into competent language learners. However, in order to become effective language learners, one must use an appropriate language learning method to match the requirements of language tasks. Thus, the purpose of this research is to look at language learning strategies utilised by polytechnic students to improve their speaking abilities in English as a second language. A questionnaire was utilised to gather quantitative data in order to meet the goal of the study. This research included 37 ESL learners from a polytechnic in Sarawak. The results revealed that different learners use various learning strategies to enhance their speaking abilities in English as a second language. The results also expect to have a substantial influence on learners, particularly educators, in terms of incorporating the appropriate and successful language learning practises into their teaching and learning in order to establish a successful language learning environment.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategies, English Language, Speaking Skills, Polytechnic, ESL Learners

## Introduction

Educational institutions used to review the curriculum from time to time in order to prepare learners who obtained different useful skills and knowledge and thus make them successful in their future career. Many Malaysian academic establishments have begun to revise their curricula in response to the latest government education initiatives. In the polytechnic context, a course known as English for Specific Purposes or ESP was replaced with

Communicative English (CE) to comply with the new Malaysian policy on English education. The new curriculum emphasises the relevance of students' capacity to communicate in English and provides important gestures or words that may be used in a range of social scenarios, with the goal of preparing students to succeed academically and technically after graduation (Rashidah & Mohamad, 2018). With the revision made, polytechnic learners are expected to be well-rounded individuals in their future employment.

Nevertheless, academics, society and potential employers are concerned about the poor level of English language competency of polytechnic students. Graduates who have the ability to communicate effectively would most likely be the preference of future employers. Diversely, graduates with low self-esteem and a poor command of English will be less likely to get a job. This is most likely due to the students' uneasiness and anxiousness while conversing in English. Students feel inferior when speaking the language as they feel that their peers are more superior than them and this significantly affects the students' performance in successfully mastering the English language (Aarif et al., 2019). This issue has been addressed via varying language strategies that help students in obtaining essential language learning abilities while studying the English language. However, most research is focused on the broader spectrum of the English language acquisition rather than focusing on a single skill.

Hence, the purpose of this research is to discover language learning techniques used by students at Politeknik Mukah, especially in engineering courses, to improve their English speaking skills. This study aims to answer the research question as follows,

1. What are the language learning strategies that adopted by polytechnic ESL learners in improving their English-speaking skill?

## **Literature Review**

### *Language Learning Strategy*

Language Learning Strategies can be defined as actions taken by learners in the learning process. Even though they lack specific definitions and are classified controversially, they are becoming of increasing interest to several modern-day educators due to their learning-enhancing potential. It is no doubt that the language learning strategy is vital in ensuring many ways for a learner to excel in learning a language especially L2. Learning strategies are also defined as "specifications, behaviours, steps, or techniques which require learners seeking out conversation partners or giving oneself the mode of encouragement to grapple with a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcela & Oxford, 192, p. 63) as cited in (Oxford, 2001). When learners purposefully pick strategies appropriate to their styles of learning and L2 tasks, these become a valuable set of tools for conscious, active and focused self-regulation of learning. Another prominent researcher in this field, Rubin (1975, p.43) as cited in Griffith (2004), gave a very large definition of learning strategies as "the techniques or devices which learners may use to acquire knowledge". Hsiao and Oxford (2002) stated that every current classification in its own right consists of an implicit theory about the nature of second language learning strategies and that to some extent, about second language learning overall. For example, if a system is divided, substantial classification for affective (emotion and motivation-management) strategies and social learning strategies, the implicit theory tells that these types of strategies are crucial and that learners affect and social interaction play main roles in second language learning. Consequently, both educators and researchers are often

confused regarding which system to adhere to when executing strategy research, enhancing learners' autonomy through learning strategies in learning a language, engaging learners in strategy instruction in the classroom, or developing a syllabus and materials which involves learning strategies.

Oxford (2001) also stated that learning strategies can be categorized into six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social.

#### Oxford (2001) 6 Learning Strategies

i. Cognitive strategies, according to Oxford (2010), are the skills which allow a learner to apply the language material indirectly. Learners apply these through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarising, synthesising, outlining, reorganising information to develop stronger schemas (knowledge structures), practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formally.

ii. Metacognitive strategies are applied to manage the L2 tasks as a whole. This refers to the ability where the learners are able to identify their own learning styles preferences and their needs in order for them to plan for a task, collecting information to tackle the tasks, monitoring their mistakes and evaluating the rate of success of the type of learning strategy they applied

iii. Memory-related strategies assist learners to enable them to link one L2 item or concept with another but do not automatically involve deep comprehension on the item itself. A variety of memory-related strategies allow learners to acquire and receive information in an orderly manner. The most common would be the use of visuals, total physical response and mechanical means, for instance, the use of flash cards to install visual connection to word meanings.

iv. Compensatory strategies or also known as communicative strategies assist the learners to make connections and close the gap on missing knowledge (e.g guessing to make meanings in context). This strategy aids in language learning significantly among L2 learners of foreign language.

v. Affective strategies assist learners in learning by recognizing one's mood and anxiety level, identifying one's feelings, using rewards and positive self-talk to enhance proficiency. However, according to research by Mullins (1992) as cited in Oxford (2001), affective strategies has portrayed to be negatively linked with some rate of L2 proficiency as it was justified that as some learners became increasingly proficient, affective strategies are no longer required as much to move forward.

vi. Social strategies help learners to improve their proficiency by working with others to understand not only the target language, but the culture as well. Strategies involve asking questions for clarification and verification, especially with native speakers to enhance one's proficiency.

#### **Good Language Learner**

What makes a good language learner? According to Rubin (1975) as cited in Liang (2009), a good language learner possesses a few characteristics which includes 'the sense of willingness and accurately guess, willing to communicate, are uninhibited to make mistakes, focus on both structure and semantics, take advantage of any practice opportunities, and monitor their own speech and that of others'. Despite differing perspectives on how learning strategies influence learning outcomes and how they are linked to other factors, on perceptible differences between the behaviours of effective learners and those of their less

effective counterparts, a list of characteristics shared by 'good language learners' has been widely recognised by L2 researchers and educators. Torres (2013), as referenced in Su (2018), analysed several definitions and classifications of language learning strategy, studied the strategy usage of "excellent" language learners, and provided a method for strategy training and self-regulatory awareness practice. Apart from those generally acknowledged characteristics of 'good language learner', an argument made by Oxford (2002) as cited in Hsiao & Oxford (2002) about other variation in strategies use among effective and less effective learners shows the importance of training. She mentioned that effective learners are not just aware of the strategies, but also proficient in selecting and integrating different language tasks together more efficiently. In contrast, the high performing approach did not suit the less effective learners although they claimed to be independent of the strategy use awareness. Based on Oxford's findings, it is sensible to state the fact that the value of learner training should not stay at the consciousness-raising level. According to the study executed out by Saputra & Subekti (2017), learners who apply more speaking learning strategies to enhance and improve their communicative ability have the tendency to do well in speaking skills. In light to this, learners should be aware that applying the language learning strategies can be gratifying and it categorises them as a good language learner. It is very crucial for students to be able to identify their own preferred learning styles in order for them to discover which language learning strategies are their preferences. Additionally, it is substantial that the quality of language learning can be improved based on learners' preferred learning strategies (Ooi et al., 2021). Once the strategies can become a habit, that would eventually modify them to become good language learners (Hashim et al., 2018). Learners need to be able to identify their own preferences in strategy when it comes to language learning. Their choice of strategies might be a combination of either two or three, anything that works for them to enhance their language. It is their characteristic of having the realisation of their own learning that makes them a good language learner when it comes to improving their communication skills.

### **Communicative Strategy**

Communicative or speaking is an ability to orally express opinions, thoughts, facts and feelings to other people, animals and even to oneself. It is no denying that communication is one of the skills that requires the learners to be proficient in when it comes to becoming a proficient speaker and the goal of English language teaching is to mould the students' communicative proficiency so that they will be able to interact and communicate with others. According to Nunan (2003, p. 48) (cited in Mart, 2012, p. 91) Speaking is a productive oral skill which involves systematic verbal speech construction to portray meaning. According to Heriansyah (2012) (cited in Zakaria et al., 2019) the competency of communicative skills among students is measured based on their abilities to reciprocate messages or information intelligibly to other person and the receivers could comprehend what they are trying to say. From another point of view, Brown (2004, p. 140) points out that "Speaking is an active and a two-way communication process of semantics that involves producing and receiving and processing information". In communication, the learners learn how to organise ideas, arrange sentences systematically, and express language in verbal form with good pronunciation and comprehensible language. Strategies are pivotal in the process of learning and irrefutable worth every effort. In order to be proficient in verbal communication, learners must also learn about how to convey meanings in the language based on the context they used in speaking.

Some studies have dealt with the effect of LLS use on language proficiency. Both Liu (2010); Platsidou & Kantaridou (2014) as cited in Habók & Magyar (2018) stressed out that language use is influenced by the learning strategy applied. It is crucial in the predicting language performance. Wu (2008) noted that cognitive strategies have the most dominant effect on proficiency. When it comes to using Memory-related strategies, learners of L2 tend to experience retroactive interference. According to Lefrançois (2012), numerous studies have shown that learners who learned two different sets of materials and then were asked to recall one or the other to investigate whether recall would be interfered, it often happened. Often when a learner is in the process of learning to communicate in second languages, they would face interference whether it is proactive or retroactive interference. For instance, if a learner half learned a language, such as English, and later on trying to learn a related language, such as Spanish, the learner might find himself recalling English words. This is known as proactive interference. When a learner has mastered Spanish, he might find it difficult to remember some of the English words he previously knew. This is known as retroactive interference. Rao (2016) posited that English proficiency significantly affects learning strategy use. High-proficiency students are more open to more strategies compared to low-proficiency learners. As a part of language skills, speaking is the basis of communication because most speaking is one part of a two-ways conversation (Shin & Crandall, 2014) as cited in Bayuong et al. (2019). In light of current educational evolution and needs, language teachers play a vital role in introducing learners to various strategies. This allows the learners to select strategies that are suitably aligned with their purposes and task requirements. Educators are by far important especially in identifying and delivering effective language learners' language learning strategies to a wide range of learners (Mahalingam & Yunus, 2017). Although "the communicative approach completely encourages learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning" (Oxford et al., 1989, p.33) as cited in Hsiao and Oxford (2002), typically emphasize the communicative language process, as in previous methods and approaches, has been on how educators execute their lesson and teach, with relatively little attention paid to how learners learn. Even as of now, it is hard to find textbooks with materials that include learning strategies despite all the research done.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Procedure*

This study was a quantitative study that involved Communicative English Semester 2 ESL students in a polytechnic located in Mukah, Sarawak. For this study, 37 ESL students in total were purposively chosen from three different Engineering courses, specifically Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering were involved. This study was conducted using a survey research design through questionnaires adopted from Young Learner's Language Strategy Use Survey (Cohen & Oxford, 2002) and Language Strategy Use Survey (Cohen, Oxford and Chi, 2002). This data collection method most suited the objective of the study. The questionnaire was generated to identify the pupils' preferred learning strategies in speaking skills. The questionnaire consisted of six parts amounting to 20 items. These six parts included as shown in table 1.

Table 1

*Six Parts of Questionnaire for Learning Strategies*

Part A	Memory Strategy
Part B	Cognitive Strategy
Part C	Compensation Strategy
Part D	Metacognitive Strategy
Part E	Affective Strategy
Part F	Social Strategy

Table 2

*The adapted Likert scale with 3 scales.*

Scale	1	2	3
Meaning	I use this strategy and find it useful.	I have tried this strategy, but welcome learning more about it.	I have never tried this strategy.

Based on Table 2, the Likert scale was adapted and the level of agreement was indicated on a scale of 1 to 3. Before the participants started answering the questionnaire, researchers explained the aim of the survey and gave details regarding the questionnaire to the respondents to make sure they understood the meanings of each item. Participants were permitted to ask the meanings of the words they did not know. Google form was used to conduct the survey. The participants were gathered in their groups and answered the survey during the Google Meet.

**Data Analysis Method**

In this study, a descriptive statistic is used to analyse the data gathered. According to Roni et al. (2020), a descriptive statistic is a way to summarize and explain the numerical data collected. From the collected data, the researchers calculated the means for each item and identified the highest preferred learning strategies among ESL students from Engineering courses at Polytechnic, Mukah, Sarawak.

**Findings and Discussion**

Table 3 shows the demographic profiles of the respondents who are involved in this study. 37 of them are from the same institution and study in the Engineering Department. Two items were asked in order to know their demographic background which are the gender and the courses they have followed in the Engineering course.



Table 3

*Demographic profiles of the respondents*

No	Item	%	
1	Gender	Male	70.3
		Female	29.7
2	Engineering Department	Civil	43.2
		Mechanical	27
		Electrical	29.7

According to the table presented, more male students (70.3%) took part in this study, by comparing with the female students (29.7%) While for their courses, Civil Engineering (43.2%) students took part the most in answering the survey compared to Mechanical Engineering (27%) and Electrical Engineering students (29.7%).

#### **What are the language learning strategies that adopted by engineering students in Politeknik Mukah in improving their English speaking skill?**

The research question is answered using data gathered from the SILL questionnaire and Young Learners' Language Learning Strategy Use Survey by Cohen and Oxford. The questionnaire is categorised under Oxford's classification, which are "Memory Strategy", "Cognitive Strategy", "Compensation Strategy", "Metacognitive Strategy", "Affective Strategy" and "Social Strategy".

The following Table 4 - 9 present data that involves the selection of the respondents. All the categories in the tables consist of three options for the respondents to make their choice, whether they 'use the strategy and find it useful' which is represented by the number "1" they 'have tried the strategy but welcome learning more about it' which is represented by the number "2" as well as they 'never tried this strategy' which is exhibited by the number "3". All the 6 tables are descriptively analysed and each table represents one strategy with the percentage for every item.

Table 4

*Memory Strategy*

Memory Strategies	1	2	3
I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	32.4	43.2	24.3
I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help remember the word.	35.1	43.2	21.6
I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	18.9	56.8	24.3
I review my English speaking lessons often.	29.7	62.2	8.1
I remember new English words or phrases by remembering lectures or conversations that I have socially.	29.7	59.5	10.8

Table 4 demonstrates the memory strategies that the engineering students used in English language learning. 35.1% of the students think that linking the sound of a new English vocabulary with a picture or its concept in memorizing that particular word is a practical strategy to learn English. Besides, most of the students (62.2%) have reviewed their English speaking lesson often and would love to understand more about it. Conversely, 24.3% of the students particularly never incorporate new English terms in assisting them to remember as well as visualize a situation in which the English words that may be used for recalling purposes.

Table 5

*Cognitive Strategy*

Cognitive Strategies	1	2	3
I am likely to practice new grammatical structures in different situations to check out my confidence level with the structures.	29.7	56.8	13.5
I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	29.7	62.2	8.1
I try not to translate word-for-word.	32.4	40.5	27
I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	56.8	32.4	10.8
I try to talk like native English speakers.	32.4	59.5	8.1

Table 5 displays the cognitive strategies of the engineering students which they apply in learning the English language. Most of the students (56.8%) find that watching English



language TV shows spoken in English and going to movies spoken in English is an effective way to learn English. Apart from that, 62.2% of the students have put in their effort in searching for new words in their own language which sound alike to the new terms in English and they would like to explore more about that. Nonetheless, 13.5% of them never look into themselves about their confidence level with the new grammatical structures when they practise the structures in different contexts.

Table 6

*Compensation Strategy*

Compensation Strategies	1	2	3
I am likely to switch to my own language if my partner can understand what I am saying.	51.4	37.8	10.8
Whenever necessary I use gestures as a way of conveying what I mean.	27	56.8	16.2
I will look for a different way to express an idea; for example, I use a synonym or describe the idea or object I want to talk about.	29.7	51.4	18.9
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	21.6	59.5	18.9
I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	18.9	54.1	27

Table 6 lays out the compensation strategy of the engineering students when learning English language. 51.4% of the students probably switch to their native language if their peers understand what they are saying in English language learning. Other than that, most of them (59.5%) have tried the guessing method in order to comprehend unknown English terms and would love to continue using this learning strategy. The students (56.8%) have also attempted to use gestures in telling them what they mean whenever necessary and are willing to pick up this strategy. Contrarily, 27% of the students never try to make up new terms or phrases if they don't know the correct ones in English.

Table 7

*Metacognitive Strategy*

Metacognitive Strategies	1	2	3
I plan out in advance what I want to say.	27	62.2	10.8
I ask myself how a native speaker might say something and I try to practice saying it that way.	43.2	45.9	10.8
I look for people I can talk to in English.	37.8	48.6	13.5
I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	62.2	27	10.8
I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	43.2	45.9	10.8

Table 7 depicts the metacognitive strategies adopted by the engineering students in their English language learning. 62.2% of the students attempt to look for numerous ways as they can to practise their English. 43.2% of the students used to ask themselves how a native speaker might say something and they put their effort into practicing saying it the same way. They find this particular strategy is useful when it comes to English learning. Meanwhile, it is found that 62.2% of the students have tried to plan out in advance about what they want to say and they would like to learn more about this strategy. However, 13.5% of the students never look for people who he or she can talk to in English.

Table 8

*Affective Strategy*

Affective Strategies	1	2	3
I regularly seek out people with whom I can speak the new language.	13.5	67.6	18.9
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	32.4	45.9	21.6
I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	27	59.5	13.5
I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	35.1	54.1	10.8
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	27	51.4	21.6

Table 8 presents the affective strategies that Engineering students take on in learning English. 35.1% of the students realize that they are stressed and worried when they are studying or utilizing English. 67.6% of them have attempted to actively look for someone with whom they can practise the new language and would love to discover more about this strategy. Besides, 59.5% of them have encouraged themselves to speak English even when they are worried about making mistakes and willing to master this strategy. On the contrary, 21.6% of students never try to relax when they are frightened of using English as well as interact with other persons regarding how they feel when they are learning English respectively.

Table 9

*Social strategy*

Social Strategies	1	2	3
I frequently ask questions as a way to be sure I am involved in conversation.	21.6	64.9	13.5
I often look to others to correct my errors in speaking and welcome the feedback.	29.7	56.8	13.5
I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	35.1	48.6	16.2
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	40.5	48.6	10.8
I ask the person I'm speaking to repeat or to slow down when I do not understand what he or she said	48.6	43.2	8.1

Table 9 illustrates the social strategies employed by the Engineering students when they are learning the English language. It can be seen that when the students (48.6%) don't catch what someone is saying, they urge the person to repeat or slow down. Meanwhile, 40.5% of the students also make their effort in learning the culture of English speakers in their English learning. 64.9% of the students have attempted to ask questions regularly to ensure they are actively participating in the conversation and would like to explore more about this strategy. Nevertheless, 16.2% of the students never request the English speaker to correct them when they have the conversation.

Based on the data analysis, it was determined that engineering students at Politeknik Mukah have their own preferred English language learning strategies, which are classified into six groups by (Oxford, 1990). The findings for memory strategies revealed that students often review their English-speaking classes and remember new English terms or phrases by recalling lectures or discussions that they have with their classmates or lecturers in a social setting. Subsequently, the results for cognitive strategies show that viewing English movies and applying what they hear in their speech help students enhance their communication abilities. Students also put out additional effort in learning new grammatical structures in a variety of contexts in order to raise their level of confidence. The results of the compensation strategies demonstrated that students are more likely to communicate in their native language if the person they are speaking to knows what they are saying. They will also employ synonyms to

describe an idea and speculate if they are unable to comprehend certain English vocabulary terms.

According to the results of the metacognitive strategy, students often think out what they will say before trying to speak. They also look for as many opportunities as they can to include the English language into their discussion in order to be able to utilise it often. In terms of affective strategies, students are concerned about incorrect use of English vocabulary, but they are also on the lookout for people with whom they can talk in English. Students prefer to ask the person they are speaking with to repeat themselves or slow down if they do not comprehend what they are being told, according to the results for social strategies.

In certain circumstances, students may have fears about speaking in English verbally, and this will have a direct impact on their performance (Al-Saggaf & Al-Aidros, 2021), therefore it is important to use techniques and come up with exercises based on the learning styles of the students to guarantee that their performance improves. When it comes to material selection, the outcomes of this research will assist English language lecturers since they will be made aware of the many strategies that engineering students prefer (Yusri et al., 2013). As a result, these language learning strategies (LLS) may give a more accurate understanding to the lecturers and also enlighten them concerning the preferences of engineering students when it comes to studying English.

## **Conclusion**

This research was conducted in a polytechnic environment, with a particular emphasis on engineering students and their preferred strategies for improving their English-speaking abilities in general. Participants at a Malaysian polytechnic were found to apply a fair degree of the six strategies listed in this research. Metacognitive and social strategies are most likely preferred by these students in their English language learning process. The data presented in the results and discussion section supports this claim. On the other hand, the least preferred LLS is the affective strategy with the lowest indicator of student preference. The information collected from this study could be used and referred to by English language lecturers to help students improve their speaking skills, as well as to develop activities that are tailored to the students preferred learning strategies. Learning techniques that cater to the student's needs have to be considered to enhance their learning process. Recognizing students' preferred language learning techniques will aid both lecturers and students in achieving successful learning in the future.

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