

Identifying English Language Learning Strategies Used by Form 3 Learners in a Religious School

Nur Farhana Mohd Jais^{1,5}, Suaibatul Aslamiah Ishak^{2,5},
Khairunnisa Abu Hasan^{3,5}, Nurul Asma Ab Ghani^{4,5}, Harwati
Hashim⁵

¹Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Cheras Perdana, ²Sekolah Kebangsaan Hulu Kelang,
³Sekolah Kebangsaan Bukit Sentosa, ⁴Sekolah Kebangsaan Lukut, ⁵Faculty of Education,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Email: harwati@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) are the methods in particular acts, behaviours, procedures, or approaches that learners use to better their own development in internalising, storing, retrieving, and applying the second language (L2) learned and it often happens unconsciously. It is used to identify learners' learning style to learn about a language, specifically English language in this matter. This paper aims to identify the LLS used by Form 3 learners in a Religious School in Selangor, Malaysia. The participants for this study are 40 Form 3 learners from a religious school. The range of language proficiency is B1 & B2 according to CEFR level. A survey consisting of 50 items adopted from Oxford Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) was distributed to the respondents. This study will help the teacher to identify the learners learning strategies thus helping in planning and conducting the instructional for an English Language subject.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Oxford Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL), Religious School, English as a Second Language (ESL), Education

Introduction

Being a multiracial and multicultural country, the education system in Malaysia is quite unique to be compared to any other country in the world. In Malaysia, schools in primary and secondary levels comprise of *Sekolah Kebangsaan*, *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan*, *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* and *Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan* (MOE, 2014). All these differences are to cater to the diversity of the racial in Malaysia. Not just that, Malaysia also offers Islamic religious school dedicated specially to the Muslim learners. The only difference between Islamic religious schools from other schools is that it consolidates the memorization of the Holy Quran in the curriculum (Raja et al., 2020). Aside from that, they study the same

subjects in the curriculum as learners from other primary and secondary schools.

In the past, countless groundworks have been conducted to acquire knowledge on the learning strategies applied by the learners to learn a particular targeted language. However, it is found that very few studies were administered in the past to distinguish the strategies implemented by the learners from a religious school. Thus, we came to a resolution to carry out this research to gather more insight on how these learners from this particular religious school learn a second or foreign language, mainly English. Since this is a religious school, learning English would be a third language. Not enough exposure on the need of learning English at school or lack of support from the teachers when learning English may influence the students' language learning strategies in religious school. Rusli (2018) in her studies stated that instructors and understanding the benefits of learning English are examples of extrinsic factors that influence English proficiency of the learners thus having a fantastic English instructor and a positive teacher-student relationship may have an impact on learners' perceptions of instructors as sources of inspiration when learning English.

Regardless of whether they are learning English as a second or as a foreign language, the main purpose of learning English would be to equip them for the globalised world where they can be at par with learners from different educational backgrounds. Aside from that, being proficient in English would enable them to have more resources to study Islam as the teaching of Islam does not solely belong to the Arabs or the Malays per say. Chanderan (2022) stated that in the context of teaching and learning, a learner must be able to read and comprehend English-language resources, which are more plentiful and easily available. Having good English proficiency will allow them to access a vast array of high-quality academic learning resources and instructional materials available online. They will be able to have more sources from around the world as English is considered to be the universal language in this current time despite that it is the third most common language spoken in the world (Lapitskaya and Shinkarenko, 2020). Learning English formally in school will help the learners to communicate and interact in the language proficiently. The lifestyle and interaction among the learners throughout the learning process is influential as it helps mold their identity as a good muslim (Ismail, 2004). Aside from that, learning English brings good impacts to the learners as it indirectly inculcates good morality such as self - confidence in the learners (Azmi et al., 2020).

SILL or in full is known as the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning is not something new especially to educators teaching second or foreign language to the learners. Varied learners have different learning methods and strategies which they prefer the most when it comes to acquiring and developing their language skills. Indeed, what works for one learner may not work for another (Hashim et al., 2018). Knowing and acknowledging that people learn differently will help the educators to plan and implement the best and most effective strategies to enable the learners to learn a particular language better. As for the learners, it would be better for them to know their learning preferences so that they can utilise it and make acquiring a new targeted language easier and more effective (Su, 2005). Learners who are exposed to a variety of learning strategies are more proactive in helping to improve the effectiveness of their own learning.

Literature Review

Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

LLS is a notion that has been researched and analysed by a number of researchers and

practitioners over a lengthy period of time. How people learn, what makes them good at learning, and why some people are better at learning than others are part of studies on language learning strategies. Rubin (1975) as cited in Griffith and Oxford (2014) gave an early description of strategies as the approaches or instruments that a student may employ to gain knowledge. In his research, it was suggested that the strategies used by these successful language learners could be made available to less successful learners once these tactics have been identified. While according to Cohen (1998) as cited in Shi (2017), language learning strategies are "those processes that are consciously selected by learners and may result in action taken to improve the learning or use of a second or foreign language through the storage, retention, recollection, and integration of information about that language. These views have sparked a major exploration on the topic of Language Learning Strategies or better known as (LLS).

Another defined description by Oxford (1990) regarding language learning strategies is "learner activities that make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to different situations". From these definitions we can see that these researchers believe that those who are successful at learning a language are those who successfully applied effective language learning strategies to improve their language learning process. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) discovered that a successful learner uses strategy as part of proactive and innovative attempts to improve their learning. Strategies are intentionally chosen as learners determine when to apply strategies based on their perception that the methods would be effective for a specific task and learning outcome. As a result, individuals may continue to use those learning mechanisms in the language acquisition process (Suwanarak, 2019). Learners' language learning methods are the steps they take to organise their learning and achieve their goals. These are significant for learning and instruction because they promote learning autonomy and language competency, as well as being tools for active, self-directed participation (Alhaysony, 2017).

Different learners used different strategies that suit their learning conditions. It may also be affected by various other circumstances like their surroundings and proficiency. In light of these differences, academics have looked at the factors that influence learners' LLS selection in order to explain the strategic disparities in language acquisition. Various studies discovered that language learning practices had an impact on learners' language proficiency. Oflaz (2019) in his research looked at the links between anxiety, shyness, language learning approaches, speaking scores, and foreign language academic achievement among university students. (Alhaysony, 2017; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006; Riazi, 2007) investigated the effects of learners' learning styles on their gender and career inclination, while (Gan et al., 2004; Magogwe and Oliver, 2007) looked into how language proficiency and motivation influence learners' learning strategies. Through the point of views of these researchers, we can say that language learning strategies differ for each learner as all of them live differently and Individual qualities influence language learning.

Researchers have conflicting views on how to classify language learning strategies. Few researchers have criticised the attempt to group strategies. Cohen and Wang (2018) noted that this form of labelling is unique in that it has been done in a very monolithic manner, with the implicit assumption that no matter how else a method is labelled, it only serves one purpose. They strongly affirm their stand since any particular strategy's functions are more

"fluid" in nature. Repeated attempts to categorise strategies have been tangled in paradoxes according to Woodrow (2005), while Rivera-Mills and Plonsky (2007) noted that there is no consensus on how to categorise strategies. Nonetheless, many researchers continued to follow and investigate prior approaches of defining language acquisition processes, and a few researchers developed categories that are now widely used by academics all over the world.

In the early stages of the language learning methods area, researchers separated language learner techniques into roughly four basic categories: metacognitive, cognitive, social, and emotional (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Another common way of categorising language learning strategies as suggested by Rubin (1981) as cited in Griffith and Oxford (2014), is by classifying it as direct and indirect. Rubin (1981), proposed three primary ways that assist language learning directly or indirectly. The first is a learning technique that encompasses both cognitive and metacognitive processes. Learning requires cognitive strategies such as analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning information, whereas metacognitive techniques such as planning, goal-setting, and self-management allude to regulating or self-directed learning. Communication strategies are the second major category, and they contribute less directly to learning, while social strategies are used when learners are involved in tasks that require them to apply or practise their information (Rubin, 1987) as cited in (Shi, 2017). By monitoring, testing, and interviewing successful and unsuccessful university students, Naiman et al (1978) as cited in Shi (2017) identified five key learning styles. The five tactics are active task approach, recognition of language as a system, recognition of language as a form of communication, regulation of emotive demands, and self-monitoring. However, because Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is the most widely used instrument in the field of LLS and lays out the most thorough hierarchy of learning strategies to date, plus will be used as a reference for this research, her work will be discussed in greater detail.

Oxford Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL)

Oxford (1990) created a new language learning strategy system with two categories: direct and indirect techniques. Direct techniques are specialised methods that involve the use of words and are divided into memory, cognition, and compensating strategies. Indirect techniques do not need you to use the language directly, but they do help you learn it. Oxford used this as the basis for categorising strategy aspects in her Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which she classified into six categories: memory, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective, and social. Oxford SILL is available in two forms. Version 7.0 is used by non-native English speakers learning English (ESL or EFL students), while version 5.1 is used by native English speakers learning a foreign language. SILL version 5.1 (Oxford, 1990) was designed for native English speakers studying a second language and contains 80 items to which learners respond on a five-point Likert scale. Version 7.0, which has 50 Likert scale items and is geared for ESL/EFL learners, is contrasted with version 7.0, which is also designed for ESL/EFL learners, for theoretical purposes. The likert scale is used to assess the learners' language acquisition processes when studying English. The 80 items of the SILL are divided into six subscales, each with a different number of items: (A) Improving your memory, (B) Using your mental processes, (C) Recovering lost knowledge, (D) Organizing and evaluating your learning, (E) Managing Your Emotions, and (F) Learning with Others (Russel, 2010).

In modern language learning research, the SILL is employed in a variety of ways. It is used as

a standard measurement tool for assessing how well second language learning programmes are being implemented. (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006) and according to Ellis (2008), SILL, Oxford's most comprehensive classification of LLS, has been routinely utilised to collect data on large numbers of language learners all around the world. It has been used frequently by researchers to collect data on large groups of primarily foreign language learners, as well as in studies that link strategy use to gender, skill level, learning styles, culture, and years of language study (Alhaysony, 2017). Based on a synthesis of past work on efficient language learning techniques, Oxford produced a more thorough classification model of language learning methods, and her classification is recognised to as the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies (Shi, 2017).

ESL Learning in Religious Schools

As stated before, different factors and environments may affect learners' language learning strategies. Thus, learners learning in non-identical institutions will have different language learning strategies. The English language is taught differently in various types of schools in Malaysia. We cannot expect learners in an international school to be learning English the same way as learners from government schools or religious schools. The differences not only come in terms of the teaching environment in the different types of schools, but it can also be affected by the learning styles of the learners. Learning styles are related to personality types, and there are differences between second language learning preferences and personality types as shown in learning styles. Learning styles have also been investigated to see how personal interaction preferences of learners influence their interactions with the learning environment (Russel, 2010).

There are a limited number of studies that have been conducted regarding the teaching of English in religious schools in Malaysia. This may be because there are various types of religious schools in this country. The federal government (Ministry of Education) or the state government oversee and control the majority of these Islamic institutions (State Islamic Council or Majlis Agama Islam Negeri). Traditional pondok and tahfiz (Quranic memorization) schools, which are primarily rural and not part of the national education system, are typically supervised by state governments (Tayeb, 2018). Islamic schools that can be found all around the country, often required and prioritised the subject of Islamic Studies for all Muslim learners in the curriculum instead of subject like English.

However, as education in Malaysia is moving towards the goal of producing holistic learners, some religious schools now prioritise the teaching of other subjects such as English too. Yet we can still see that English language learning is not seen as a priority in this kind of school, thus this environment will definitely affect learners' language learning strategies. Low English proficiency among religious school pupils has been a big issue in our educational system. The community has expressed concern about the English Language subject's modest performance in national standardised examinations at Agama Rakyat Schools (SAR), as the schools' overall performance is declining when compared to other schools (MOE, 2014). Aside from that, a study conducted in a religious school in Perak found that almost all of the English teachers in the study lacked pedagogical content expertise, and several had never undergone any formal teacher training. The observations made in the classrooms typically revealed an environment that is not conducive to English language development. This is concerning as it is a necessity for trained teachers to teach English in order for pupils to gain proficiency in the language.

This has sparked a protracted debate and is a hot topic among academics. A large percentage of learners in religious school struggle to learn English as they have no idea how to go about learning it (Ilias, 2017).

Thus, with lack of support from the environment, learners in religious schools may need to employ their own initiatives in order to grasp the language when learning English. As they become more independent compared to their peers with a more encouraging language learning environment, this may influence the findings regarding their language learning strategies. As there is a steady transition in the conventional classroom atmosphere in the era of the 21st century where teachers aren't the only ones who can impart knowledge, active and self-directed learning is expected of learners no matter what kind of environment they are in. In accordance with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the teaching and learning process should assist learners in learning by allowing them to seek out knowledge and information on their own. Language Learning Strategies, it can be inferred, are critical in assisting pupils in learning how to learn. Thus in this study we will be looking at language learning strategies among learners in religious school.

Methodology

This study is conducted using a quantitative design and it is constructed to identify the LLS used by 40 of Form 3 learners in a religious school located in Selangor. The participants' proficiency level is intermediate level (B1 & B2 achievers according to CEFR). The technique of sampling is purposive sampling. A survey adopted from Oxford Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) was given to the participants through Google Forms. The survey consisted of 50 items which were divided into 6 categories namely 1. *memory strategy* (9 items), 2. *cognitive strategy* (14 items), 3. *compensation strategy* (6 items), 4. *metacognitive strategy* (9 items), 5. *affective strategy* (6 items) and 6. *social strategy* (6 items). Data is collected through the responses received from the respondents and it is analysed using descriptive statistics in a form of frequency and percentages.

Findings and Discussion

Based on Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) surveys given to 40 Form 3 pupils at a Selangor religious school, the following findings and discussion are presented. Memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social are the six parts of the SILL questionnaires. The pupils were asked to fill out the survey using a Google Form and were given a three-point likert scale to use while responding. The findings of this study are described in the following tables.

Table 1

Memory Strategy

Strategy	Percentage
Consider the connections between what they already know and what they are learning in English.	67.5%
Using new English words in a sentence to help them recall what they've learned.	65%
Associate the sound of the word with an image of the word to help them remember a new English term	57.5%
Make a mental picture of a situation in which they may employ a new English word to remember it.	42.5%
Employ rhymes to memorise new English words	17.5%
Utilise flashcards to recall new English words	12.5%
Act out new English words physically	37.5%
Review the English classes on a regular basis	22.5%
Memorising the location of new English words or phrases on the paper, the board, or on a street sign	47.5%

According to the results of the survey, 67.5 % could genuinely connect what they already knew to what they are learning in English. It demonstrates that the majority of responders make an extra effort to recall linguistic information. Many of them also, with the frequency of 65%, try to use the new English words so that they can remember it. It might be implemented in daily conversations or online writings such as on social media (Hashim et. al, 2018). However, only 22% of them study the English lesson on a regular basis, despite the fact that many of them use new English terms in sentences to help them remember what they have learnt. Since they are in form 3, most of the respondents do not employ flashcards as a cognitive approach because it is not their typical practice even though the use of flashcards is proven to be effective in learning new vocabulary (Aba, 2019; Ma'rifah & Suhaimi, 2020; Wulandari & Chaddafi, 2022)

Table 2
Cognitive Strategy

Strategy	Percentage
Repeat the process of saying or writing new English words multiple times	52.5%
Make an effort to speak English as if a native speaker	65%
Practice the sounds of English words	65%
Employ the familiar English words in a variety of ways	52.5%
Start talks in English	32.5%
Watch English-language television series or go to English-language movies	85%
Read English for enjoyment	50%
Notes, communications, letters, and reports are written in English	32.5%
First, skim through an English text (read it quickly), then return to it and read it thoroughly	62.5%
Look for words in the mother tongue that are related to new English words.	50%
Look for patterns in English	40%
Figure out what it means by separating an English words into comprehensible bits	55%
Make an effort not to translate word for word	37.5%
Write summaries of anything heard or read in English	47.5%

The data gained from the survey have shown that a number of 85 % use English movies and TV shows as part of their cognitive strategy for learning the language. 65 % answered that they attempt to speak English like a native speaker, which requires them to practise the sounds of English words. Apart from that, the respondents lack the bravery to initiate English conversations or make notes, reports, messages, or letters in English, with only 32.5 % willing

to do so. It could be due to nervousness or grammatical errors when conversing in a foreign language. It could also be linked to a lack of grammar knowledge, and the fact that communicating in one's mother tongue is easier than communicating in English on a daily basis (Pivunka & Smolina, 2019; Badrasawi et. al, 2020; Riadil, 2020). Aside from that, half of the respondents said that as part of their cognitive learning technique, they would look for words in their own language that are comparable to new words in English.

Table 3

Compensation Strategy

Strategy	Percentage
Make educated guesses in order to grasp unfamiliar English words	77.5%
Make actions when can't think of a word to say during an English conversation	47.5%
Make up new words if don't know the correct English words	35%
Not look up every new term in English	10%
Try to predict what the other person will say next in English	45%
Use a term or phrase that signifies the same thing if you aren't able to think of an English word.	82.5%

The most preferred compensatory strategy, as seen in the table above, is that if they can't think of any terms in English, they will undoubtedly use words or phrases that have the same meaning. Aside from that, if the respondents come across some unfamiliar words during their learning process, they make predictions about its meanings and look up every new word they come across to ensure that they understand it. When they can't think of any words to say in English, 47.5 % will employ gestures. The use of gestures to emphasis or deliver meaning is effective in helping the learners, especially the weak or mediocre ones to receive and express the language more effectively (Suttora et al., 2022). It is reasonable that the amount of people who make up new words is minimal, with only 35% doing so as a compensatory method during learning.

Table 4

Metacognitive Strategy

Strategy	Percentage
Attempt to use English in as many ways as possible	70%
Take note of English errors and utilise the knowledge to help improving yourself	75%
Pay attention when someone is conversing in English	75%
Attempt to discover how to become a better English student	70%
Make a schedule to have an adequate time to study English	22.5%
Look for people to communicate in English	52.5%
Look for opportunities to read as much English as possible	55%
Have clear objectives in terms of developing English skills	47.5%
Consider about own learning progress	65%

The results suggest that the majority of respondents are aware of their English faults and are able to use this information to improve their performance in the future. It is possible that it happens on its own because they pay attention when someone speaks English, which has the same percentage as the prior strategy, 75%. It is a proof that the respondents understand the reasons or need to improve the language fluency (John et al., 2021) According to the statistics, almost all of the learners are able to use the metacognitive strategies; nevertheless, just two strategies, setting a schedule to learn English and having clear objectives for increasing English skills, do not constitute more than half of the learners. It demonstrates that these respondents can effectively govern their own learning.

Table 5

Affective Strategy

Strategy	Percentage
Try to relax whenever feel nervous of utilising English In a language learning journal, I keep track of my emotions. When I'm studying English, I chat to someone else about how I'm feeling.	55%
Motivate oneself to speak English even if terrified of making mistakes	65%
Offer a reward to oneself when do well in English	17.5%
Able to tell whenever there's a nervousness when studying using English	37.5%
Writing down emotions in a language learning journal	22.5%
Chat to someone on the feelings when learning English	25%

Based on the findings, 65% of respondents used the method of motivating themselves to keep speaking in English even when they are frightened of making mistakes since, as the expression goes, "practice only makes for improvement". When it comes to using a strategy of trying to stay calm whenever they are afraid of using English, however, the percentage dropped by 10%, indicating that more than half of these respondents would continue to encourage or motivate themselves to use English even if they are afraid of making mistakes by trying to relax whenever they need to use the language. The least strategy used with the number of only 17.5% of them give a self-reward when they do well in English which it should be done by everyone as a regression analysis revealed that rewarding oneself only after the study session was successfully finished, was the most predictive of study plan completion (Hempel, 2019).

Table 6

Social Strategy

Strategy	Percentage
Ask the person to slow down or to repeat if something said in English can't be understood	75%
Ask English speakers to correct while speaking	55%
Practice English with other students	47.5%
Seek assistance from native English speakers	37.5%
Inquire in English.	35%
Make an effort to understand the culture of English speakers	50%

Table above illustrates with a rate of 75%, the majority of respondents would likely ask the other person to slow down or to repeat something in English again if they do not fully understand it. When they speak, more than half of them (55%) ask native speakers to correct them, and they also make an effort to understand the culture of English speakers. However, just around a third of the respondents ask inquiries in English, with only 35% doing so.

All in all, according to the findings of the study, a variety of learning strategies are employed in order to become proficient language learners. According to the data gathered, respondents have nearly identical strategy preferences when it comes to adopting language learning strategies. All of the strategies indicated in Oxford's SILL are clearly used by all of the respondents. Despite the fact that not all learners employ the same strategies, there are a few that distinguish competent language learners. In general, all of the respondents employ all six categories in learning a language: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.

Conclusion

In particular, learning English as a second or foreign language is not an easy undertaking. Learners have to be aware of their learning preferences and exploit it as effective strategies or tools to enable them to learn the targeted language more effectively. By doing this, they will not only become good language learners, but also good language users where they will be able to communicate in the language more proficiently regardless if the situation is formal or informal. It is believed that educators play an important role in helping the learners to be conscious of their learning preferences and later make it as their personal method or formula in learning the second language. Profusion studies have shown that with the realisation of learners' particular learning strategies, educators will have many opportunities and possibilities to plan and implement activities which will promote a positive language learning environment for the learners.

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