

## The Use of Metacognitive and Social Language Learning Strategies in Improving Speaking Skills among Upper Secondary Students

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### Abstract

The Ministry of Education Malaysia has highlighted 4 skills in acquiring the English language namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. While the other skills soar in students' acquisition of the language, it appears that students do not perform as well in their speaking as compared to the other skills. This study aimed to find out the extent of metacognitive and social language learning strategies in improving speaking skills among students. The study was carried out in two secondary schools in Kuching, Sarawak. A total of 85 students from upper secondary; Form 4 and Form 5, were chosen as respondents. A Likert style questionnaire based on the adaptation from Language Strategy Used Inventory and SILL was sent to the students in the form of Google Form to obtain the data needed. Findings revealed that students did employ both metacognitive and social strategies in order to improve their speaking. Hence, proving both strategies mentioned were exploited well by students in acquiring the targeted language.

**Keywords:** Speaking Skills, Language Learning Strategies, Social Strategies, Metacognitive Strategies, English as Second Language (ESL).

### Introduction

The English language had long been introduced to fellow Malaysians ever since the colonisation of the British. The English language now stands as the second language of Malaysia. This later brings to the effort of the Ministry Education of Malaysia in assuring the English language is well immersed among the students through the guideline of Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of MEB 2013-2025, the ministry had highlighted to prioritise continuous development of the education system to be able to compete internationally (MOE, 2010). Torkey (2006) once mentioned among the four skills mentioned namely writing, reading, listening and speaking, priority is committed to speaking skills as the spoken language emphasizes the preeminence compared to written language. The speaking skills have made them the most vital skills to master in aiding communication in

job hunting (Ramamurthy et al., 2021). This promotes the essentiality in mastering speaking skill in the global lingua franca namely English in order to compete globally.

The CEFR-aligned Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) aims to reinforce pupils' basic understanding of the English language so that they can communicate in the language for knowledge acquisition, future workplace needs and to enable them to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts (Curriculum Development Division, 2018). It is expected of the students in the Secondary School level by the end of their schooling period to be recognized as Independent User of English language B level as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR). This comprises two levels of acquisition namely B1 which acknowledge speakers to be in threshold or intermediate level, meanwhile B2 in vantage or upper intermediate level. It is a concern for most educators that Malaysians' students' proficiency in English language is rather poor. According to Adan & Hashim, students' English level of proficiency is quite low and as they voyage to tertiary level or working field, they depict poor performance in using the language. Thus, in order to achieve such benchmarks, learners' language learning strategies (LLS) come into the picture. The production of learners with good speaking skills was highly dependent on successfulness in knowing learners' learning strategies (Kehing & Yunus, 2021). Numerous studies had been done to distinguish strategies used by learners as LLS differs from each user. Different learners have different learning styles and strategies preferences in further acquiring and developing language learning. Thus, what suits one particular learner may be inadequate for another (Hashim et al., 2018). There is a demand in identifying the appropriate LLS used by the learners in aiding the production of good language learners (Lestari & Fatimah, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

According to the initial observation, a majority of students who are in the Upper Secondary Level are showing low proficiency in English language particularly in Speaking skills. This was depicted by the students' ability to achieve the learning outcomes expected in every speaking lesson done. Owing to the fact that students had at least ten years of exposure to the English language in school, including primary school period, students should at least manage to be able to practise speaking the language at a moderate to intermediate level. Students' ability in acquiring the language can be enhanced with the proper acknowledgement of students' learning strategy. Hence, the appropriate Language Learning Strategies should be looked into in order to tackle this issue

### **Research Objectives**

This research aims to:

- identify the prominently used LLS between Social and Metacognitive strategies in improving speaking skills
- distinguish Social strategy as main strategy used in improving speaking skills
- distinguish Metacognitive strategy as main strategy used in improving speaking skills

### **Literature Review**

#### *Speaking Skills*

What are speaking skills? It is theoretically characterised in study as that of the secondary stage student's ability to express oneself orally, coherently, fluently and correctly during a particular relevant setting. Shiama (2006) believed that it is essentially to accomplish

both transactional interactional aims employing proper pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary and following the pragmatic and discourse norm of the speech. Nunan (1991) claimed that among the four main skills, speaking is considered as the most vital skill that is mastered well in learning a new language. Some academics believe that speaking skills enable us to effectively communicate. Moreover, these skills enable us to relay information verbally and in a manner that the listeners can understand the topic.

Rusdiah (2017) stated that speaking ability is among the oral skills that is critical for human interaction and communication. According to Burn and Joyce (1997), speaking is an active process of meaning construction that entails the production, receipt, and processing of information. According to Sofyan et al (2015), speaking is the ability to communicate orally with one another one's views, thoughts, facts, and feelings. According to one of the researchers, speaking is one of the gateways that learners use to communicate with others in order to accomplish specific goals and to share their opinions, intentions, hopes, and viewpoints.

In other words, speaking is the process of creating and conveying information in a variety of circumstances through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols. Speaking is also referred to as expressing thoughts, ideas, and feelings, and it involves the capacity to pronounce the words, organise them into phrases or sentences, and choose relevant terms. While Harwood (2010) discussed how speaking is a distinct mode of communication that serves as the foundation for all human relationships. Moreover, speaking is regarded as the major means of projecting and developing one's identity. In short, the researchers defined speaking as the process through which human beings attempt to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions and to exchange information through the use of utterances.

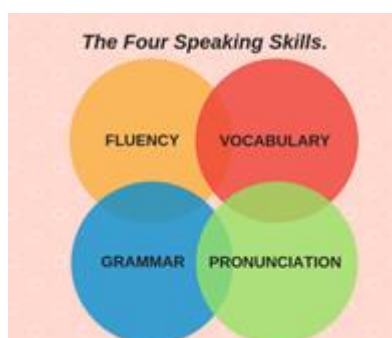


Figure 1. Speaking Skills

There are four main important skills needed to develop speaking skills which are fluency, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. As we know, these skills are required to become a good speaker. Fluency is known for how comfortable and confident someone is when speaking in English. Not only that, it is also related to a clear connection between each point that the person is trying to make. Next is vocabulary. The more vocabulary a student knows, the stronger the student is able to develop speaking skills.

Grammar is one of the required skills in speaking. Well known as the dreaded G word! Grammar is part necessity, the fewer mistakes made in speaking, the better the speaking skills

will be. Certainly, it is better to make sure that we, as Second Language Learners, have mastered the major tenses. The final skill is pronunciation which is a complex area. The sub skills of pronunciation need word and sentence stress, intonation, rhythm and enunciation.

The major problems faced by the students in speaking are pronunciation and lack of confidence. This is because students are mostly bilingual and their L1 is dominant in their daily lives. Hence, they find it difficult to pronounce certain English words. Furthermore, a lack of confidence becomes a block for them to speak fluently as well. Kashinathan & Azlina (2021) supports that lack of confidence in the English language is the main problem for learners. They have low self-esteem. This is because most students feel anxious about making mistakes while speaking English.

Maryam and Reza (2014), opined that speaking is a momentous aspect of Second Language Learning and Teaching. Language learning strategies should be carried out to figure out students' learning style to develop their speaking skills. It is a survey to evaluate and categorise students into the strategies they are most likely to employ which are memorization, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. This is very beneficial for teachers as they are able to identify students' strengths, weaknesses as well as suitable solutions to improve the students' spoken language proficiency.

### **Language Learning Strategies**

Gavriilidou et al. (2010) stated that there are numerous definitions of language learning methods in the literature, as the term remains contentious, as academics have interpreted strategies in a broad or narrow meaning. According to Oxford (1990), the purpose of learning strategies is to foster communicative competence. According to Napisah (2018), LLSs employ two primary strategies: direct and indirect strategies. Oxford (1990) differentiates direct strategies into memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. While indirect strategies are the mechanisms that facilitate language acquisition, sub strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Hurd and Lewis (2008) summarised that learning strategies are frequently characterised as the operations or procedures that a learner deliberately chooses and employs in order to acquire the target language or assist the completion of a language task.

### **Inventories**

Here, researchers have adopted and adapted two inventories in the survey. The first one being Language Strategy Use Inventory by Andrew D. Cohen, Rebecca Oxford, and Julie C. Chi (2002) and Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL (Oxford, 1990).

#### **a. Language Strategy Use Inventory**

The main objective of this inventory is to help students to be aware of new strategies, to have students identify others who have tried similar and different strategies and also to enhance language learning if any part of this activity is done in the target language.

#### **b. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)**

The most often used strategy scale is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). SILL was developed by Oxford (1990: 293-299) and has been the dominant data gathering tool for approximately 30 years in research on language learning strategies

(Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2018). Dank o et al (2019) conducted an evaluation of SILL's statistical reliability and validity. According to Adam Russel (2010), SILL may be a useful instrument for students and teachers to examine the precise language learning strategies used by scholars when learning a foreign language. A five-point Likert scale was used to create this inventory. The majority of experts felt that the SILL is very reliable across a wide range of cultural groups. The SILL's validity is predicated on its predictive and correlative connection with language performance, particularly course grades, standardised test scores, and competence ratings, as well as its established relationship with sensory preferences.

**i. Metacognitive Strategies**

As Ridwan (2017) mentioned, metacognitive skills are processes that enable individuals to effectively obtain new information and, as a result, develop into more autonomous thinkers. Metacognitive strategies, as defined by Oxford (1990), assist learners in self-regulating their learning. Metacognitive strategies address three components: centering learning, arranging and planning learning, and evaluating learning, all of which aid students in taking charge of their own learning. Metacognitive learning strategies are utilized in the Oxford system to regulate or self-direct language acquisition, as it entails a variety of processes such as planning, prioritising, setting objectives, and self-management. For instance, beginning with well-known content and determining ahead of time what to focus on.

**ii. Social Strategies**

In a prior study, Rusdiah (2017) stated that social skills are critical while engaging with others. The majority of researchers believed that social skills were the most important factor influencing academic success. While social strategies are concerned, the three components are inquiring, cooperating, and empathising with others. Furthermore, several researchers concluded that social strategies involve activities that reveal and practise students' knowledge. The majority of researchers believed that social strategies are activities that students participate in in order to gain exposure to a setting conducive to practise. For instance, by probing for comprehension or facts and cooperating with classmates or native speakers of the target language.

## **Methodology**

**a) Research Design**

A quantitative descriptive research design was carried out using a survey method for this study. The data collected was to find out the extent of metacognitive and social strategies may improve students' speaking skills. A survey questionnaire using Google Form was used for the purpose of collecting data of students' learning strategies, The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions.

**b) Research Instrument**

The survey questionnaires were adopted and adapted the instruments from two inventories which are Language Strategy Use Inventory and SILL. The researchers modified the questionnaire to a simpler version which focused on two skills, social strategies and metacognitive strategies. The 20 statements from 2 parts of the questionnaire are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Questionnaire Description*

STRATEGY		PART	QUESTIONS
INDIRECT STRATEGY	SOCIAL	A	10
	METACOGNITIVE	B	10

A Likert scale was used interchangeably on how the participants responded to the statements by choosing from 1 to 5. The scale is shown in the table below.

Table 2

*Likert scale Description for Each Questionnaire Statement*

SCALE	DESCRIPTION
1	Never true of me
2	Usually not true of me
3	Somewhat true of me
4	Usually true of me
5	Always true of me

**Research Sample**

For this study, the researchers used a purposive sampling method in the selection process of the sample of the study. 85 Form 4 and Form 5 students from two different secondary schools in Kuching, Sarawak, were chosen. There were males and females of the Upper Secondary level. The students' levels of English ranged from weak to advanced with a majority of them learning English as a second language.

**Data Collection Method**

The researchers used 5 point- Likert questionnaires which were adopted and adapted from Language Strategy Use Inventory and SILL. 20 questions were classified into two categories: social strategies and metacognitive strategies. The questionnaire was administered online using Google Form. Google Form aids in easier and more immediate responses collection as well as data tabulation.

**Procedures**

The students answered the survey at home through Google Form. In order to avoid possible misinformation when completing the questionnaire, students received basic information on what language strategies were and the purpose of the survey. They were explained the nature of the research and were told to answer honestly.

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to find out to what extent social and metacognitive language learning strategies help in improving speaking skills. The study revealed that students employed both social and metacognitive strategies.

Table 3

*Results of the Social Language Learning Strategies questionnaire*

Language Learning Strategies	Specific Strategies	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
<b>Social</b>	If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again	28	32.9
	I ask for further clarification when I do not understand something in English	29	34.1
	I practice speaking in English with my friends or my teachers	30	35.3
	I try to ask questions in English	33	38.8
	I ask for help from my English speaking friends	30	35.3
	I look for people I can talk to in English	26	30.6
	I ask questions in English as a way to be involved in an English conversation	27	31.8
	I encourage others to correct my English when I make mistakes in my speech	31	36.5
	I try to learn about the culture of English speakers	29	34.1
	I use gestures as a way to try to get my meaning across when I do not know an English word	29	34.1

In Part A of the questionnaire given, the first statement is: If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again. In total, 28 respondents (32.9%), which is the vast majority of those who answered, agreed with the statement. The second statement is: I ask for further clarification when I do not understand something in English. In



response to this statement, the vast majority of respondents, 29 respondents (34.1%) agreed with the statement. The third statement is: I practice speaking in English with my friends or my teachers. According to the results of the study, the statement is met with enthusiastic agreement of 35.3% of the respondents (30 respondents). The fourth statement is: I try to ask questions in English. Results of the research showed that by far the majority of those who responded, which is 33 respondents (38.8%) strongly agreed with this statement. The fifth statement is: I ask for help from my English speaking friends. 35.3% of the respondents strongly agree in response to the statement. The sixth statement is: I look for people I can talk to in English. In reaction to the statement, 30.6% of the respondents which is 26 respondents indicated a neutral point of view. The seventh statement is: I ask questions in English as a way to be involved in an English conversation. In response to the statement, the vast majority of respondents which is 27 respondents (31.8%) expressed a point of view that was neutral. The eighth statement is: I encourage others to correct my English when I make mistakes in my speech. The vast majority of respondents, 31 respondents (36.5%) agreed with the statement. The ninth statement is: I try to learn about the culture of English speakers. 34.1% of those who answered this question (29 respondents) were ambivalent about it. The tenth statement is: I use gestures as a way to try to get my meaning across when I do not know an English word. 34.1% of those who answered the survey gave a neutral response to the statement (29 respondents).



Table 4

*Results of the Metacognitive Language Learning Strategies questionnaire*

Language Learning Strategies	Specific Strategies	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
<b>Metacognitive</b>	I look for a different way to express the idea, like using a synonym in English	27	31.8
	I initiate conversations in the English language as often as possible	31	36.5
	I practice new grammatical structures in different situations to build my confidence level in using English language	27	31.8
	I switch back to my mother tongue if I know that the person I'm talking to can understand what is being said	29	34.1
	I always seek opportunities to try speaking the language like participating in English - focused activities (HIP/ Language Month activities/ English Club activities)	26	30.6
	I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better	32	37.6
	I try to find as many ways as I can to use the English language	30	35.3
	I pay attention when someone is speaking in English	33	38.8
	I have clear goals for improving my English skills	29	34.1
	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English	31	36.5

In Part B of the questionnaire given, the first statement is: I look for a different way to express the idea, like using a synonym in English. The majority of respondents which is 27 respondents (31.8%) had a neutral response toward this statement. The second statement is: I initiate

conversations in the English language as often as possible. In response to this statement, 36.5% of the respondents (31 respondents) had a neutral response toward the statement. The third statement is: I practice new grammatical structures in different situations to build my confidence level in using the English language. 31.8% of the respondents (27 respondents) agreed with this statement. The fourth statement is: I switch back to my mother tongue if I know that the person I'm talking to can understand what is being said. This statement was supported by a majority of 29 respondents (34.1%) who agreed with it. The fifth statement is: I always seek opportunities to try speaking the language like participating in English - focused activities (HIP/ Language Month activities/ English Club activities). In response to this statement, 30.6% of the respondents (26 respondents) disagreed with it as well as the same number of respondents expressing a neutral opinion about it. The sixth statement is: I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better. 37.6% of the respondents (32 respondents) strongly agreed with this statement. The seventh statement is: I try to find as many ways as I can to use the English language. Approximately 30 respondents (35.3%) stated a neutral view regarding this statement in response to it, representing the great majority of those who responded. The eighth statement is: I pay attention when someone is speaking in English. Approximately 33 respondents (38.8%) strongly agree with the statement. The ninth statement is: I have clear goals for improving my English skills. An overwhelming majority of 29 respondents (34.1%) agree with the statement. The tenth statement is: I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English. According to the findings of the survey, 31 respondents (36.5%) strongly agreed with the statement.

### **Discussions**

Findings have revealed that metacognitive strategies are employed among upper secondary students in the two different schools in Kuching, Sarawak, to improve their speaking skills. The statement, "I pay attention when someone is speaking in English" is the most used metacognitive strategy with a high percentage of 38.8 or 33 out of 85 students. This is followed by the statement, "I notice my English mistakes, and use that information to help me do better" with a percentage of 37.6 and lastly, "I look for opportunities to speak as much as possible in English" comes in third with 36.5%. These findings are in line with what O'Malley & Chamot (1990) who indicated that there is a correlation between learners' success and the use of metacognitive strategies. They added that if students do not employ metacognitive strategies, they will not be able to review their progress and accomplishments and improve themselves. Generation Z students are technological savvy and unlike students in the past, they are more independent, able to think creatively and critically and are more self-sufficient. Hence, metacognitive strategies allow students to take charge of their own learning process (John et al., 2021). Students who apply this strategy realize that they have a problem in their speaking and so would take the necessary steps to try to close the gap. They take it upon themselves to observe how people usually speak in the target language. Moreover, students are more aware of the grammatical errors they make and try to better themselves by not repeating them again. To be familiarized with the target language, one needs to be communicating actively in daily activities (Chen, 2016). This supports the third statement stating that students find opportunities to converse in English to improve themselves.

The findings also show that social strategies are equally important when students learn how to speak in English. The findings correlate with Harden (2013) who mentioned that

social strategy is one of the best strategies in language learning. This strategy involves students' ability to engage in the target language through interaction with others (John et al, 2021). The statement "I try to ask questions in English" is the most common approach used by students. Lan & Oxford (2003) mentioned that one of the functions of social strategies is asking questions in the target language. This is depicted in the questionnaire with the highest percentage of 38.8 or 33 out of 85 students. The second highest with 36.5% is the statement, "I encourage others to correct my English when I make mistakes in my speech". This is again parallel to previous research by Lan & Oxford (2003), that correcting mistakes is another function of this strategy. The last two statements, "I practise speaking in English with my friends or my teachers" and "I ask for help from my English speaking friends" have an equal percentage of 35.3. This is so because students feel more comfortable practising speaking with their friends which is less intimidating. The fact that they are the same age with almost the same proficiency level also makes it easier. Working in pairs and groups also benefit the students as working cooperative provides students a safe platform to share opinions (Hashim et al., 2019). On the other hand, if they are talking with friends of a higher proficiency level, more advanced students can help those with lower proficiency level to communicate (Henriquez et al., 2017).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

In conclusion, the purpose of this study is to examine the extent of both social and metacognitive language learning strategies in improving speaking skills. Students may or may not be aware of the strategies but they do take actions to improve themselves. This is an important step for a student to be a good language learner. As mentioned by Dawi et al. (2021), learning strategies are essential to determine the success of learning a second language. The outcomes of this study reaffirm the importance of adopting Language Learning Strategies (LLS) as learners for they know what works for them to enhance themselves. This study has also revealed that both metacognitive and social language learning strategies play an important role when students learn a second language.

Speaking skill, being one of the most feared by students, was often sidelined in the past as oral examinations were school-based and more often than not, students merely recite verbatim from memory. The new KSSM syllabus, however, is a total game changer. With an equal weightage of 25% similar to the other 3 skills, students now realise they must up their game and perform better. When students are aware of these strategies, they are more mindful what actions to take on their own to increase their proficiency level. Hence, teachers play a dominant role here in exposing students to different strategies and to train them in applying the approaches in their learning. Besides, having adequate knowledge and skills will allow for more diverse and creative teaching techniques. Creating a conducive environment for speaking activities would also help lessen students' anxiety level so they can perform better. Teachers of other subjects can also conduct investigations to find out their students' language learning strategies to aid them in their learning. As for the students, they need to be motivated to use the language without reservations and nurture a genuine interest to want to speak better. Additionally, researchers are encouraged to investigate language learning approaches by creating and adapting materials to cater for learners with different abilities to maximise their learning capacity.

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