

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) Preferred by Form 6 Students in Improving Writing Skill

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Abstract

English is used as the second language (L2), which is also a major part of the primary and secondary school syllabus. It is a widely used language in Malaysia. Although it has a wide usage among students in Malaysia, many Malaysian students struggle to write accurately. Their lacking in writing skill has caused them to perform badly in exams and hence, jeopardizing their chances to further their studies to the university. This happens due to the most common mistake made by students which is in the language learning strategies fostered when acquiring the English language, specifically writing skill. Selecting the right language learning strategy may be the key to improve their proficiency. This study is designed to explore the language learning strategies preferred by pre-university students to improve the quality of writing skills. Researching and exploring the multitudes of language learning strategies is important to teachers in order to find out the strategies preferred by the pre-university students.

Keywords: Writing Skill, Language Learning Strategies, Pre-University Students, Strategies Preferred

Introduction

Malaysia, a multi-racial and multi-ethnic country, is rich with many languages. Despite that, English is used as the second language (L2), which is also a major part of the primary and secondary school syllabus. It is a widely used language in Malaysia. It is taught to equip the students to be able to communicate in English since most private universities and colleges teach in English. English is also a compulsory subject for all pre-university students as they have to sit for Malaysian University English Test (MUET), as it is a requirement to proceed with their under-graduate studies.

Although it has a wide usage among students in Malaysia, many Malaysian students struggle to write and speak fluently and accurately. Though many struggle to speak fluently, more students face difficulty in writing skills. This has to be looked into as students are

required to complete their assignments, build their resume and many other tasks are assigned and to be completed in English. Their lacking in writing skill has caused them to perform badly in exams and hence, jeopardizing their chances to further their studies to the university.

This happens due to the most common mistake made by students which is in the language learning strategies fostered when acquiring the English language, specifically writing skill. Selecting the right language learning strategy may be the key to improve their proficiency.

Weinstein and Mayer (1986) define learning strategies as specific behaviours and thoughts that influence the learner's encoding process. It is believed that a learning strategy facilitates the learner's acquisition, storage, or retrieval of information. Language learning strategies (LLS) are tools that empower students by enabling them to use "strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affects learning directly" (Rubin, 1987). Language learning strategies are the conscious steps or behaviours put into practice by language learners to enhance and expedite the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information (Oxford, 2011).

In Malaysia, the role of a facilitator in the classroom is held by the teachers. Hence, researching and exploring the multitudes of language learning strategies is important to teachers in order to find out the strategies preferred by the students. This study is designed to explore the learning strategies preferred by Form 6 students to improve the quality of writing skills. This paper is based on a questionnaire adapted from Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which was administered to fifty Form 6 students in a rural school in Sabah. This study was structured upon the following research objectives:

- 1) To identify the language learning strategies used by the Form Six students in writing skill
- 2) To identify the language learning strategies frequently used to improve writing skill

Literature Review

Writing Skill

Writing is a particularly challenging task because, as summarized in Yasuda (2021), in her studies, Language Teaching for Young Learners, different skills need to be developed for instances transcription (spelling and letter formation), language-based skills (word choice, lexical variation or sophistication, construction of grammatically correct sentences, among others) and mechanics (punctuation). Moreover, the children as the writers need to be aware of the type of audience their text is addressed to and of the use of coherence and cohesive devices. This task is even more challenging for second learners (L2) (Manchón & Matsuda, 2016), as the process and product are influenced by learner proficiency level in the L2, their literacy in the first language and potential differences in rhetorical approaches to the text.

Hence, to help students' writing progression, it is important to understand different writing stages. According to Graves (2018), where it is extensively discussed in his book *Patterns of Child Control of the Writing Process* (1984), there are 5 stages of children writing development. It is presented in Figure 1.

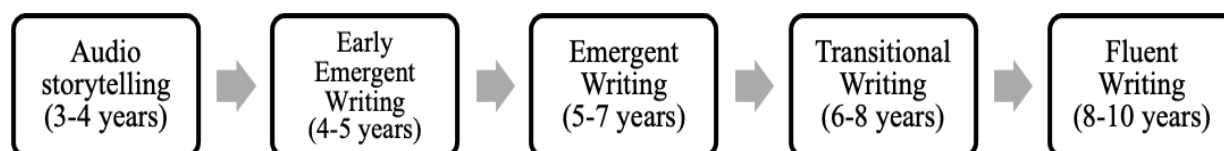


Figure 1 : Writing Development

At the age of 3 to 4 years, audio storytelling when at this stage is based on the spoken language and gives the youngest users the opportunity to tell stories by using the recording function.

Afterwards, the early emergent writing which they are attending kindergarten at the age of 4 to 5. It is known as Early Emergent Writing. It is characterized by 'scribbling'. At this age children pretend that they are writing by hitting random keys on the keyboard. Which later they continue to add conventional writing (translation) in the adult writing field, which gives the child the chance to see the spelling of familiar words.

The emergent writing stage which at the age of 5 to 7 when they are in transition between preschool and first year of primary school. At this stage, children have gained an initial understanding of phonics which is the correspondence between letters patterns (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes). According to Stagg et. al (2020) which their research examines teacher-child and peer interactions during collaborative writing and writing-mediated play in primary classrooms shows children more frequently talked about the letters and sounds of words.

Later, the transitional writing which they are 6 to 8 years old. At this stage, there is a one-to-one relationship between the letters and sounds represented in children's writing. For example, word like 'people' could be spelled 'pepl'. Children will learn through comparison that many letters have different sounds and that some are silent. At the same time, children will start to notice and learn about the use of punctuation and capital letters.

Fluent Writing Stage (8-10 years), around this age, children start to notice and learn all the irregularities in written language. Mnubi et al (2020) described this stage as the longest learning phase in writing development and can extend over several years. When children are able to spell more than 75% of the words correctly, it no longer makes sense to 'translate' their writing in the adult text field. According to Anne (2020), at this age, the educator should consider students' power to act on their interests and intentions, on their own inclinations.

According to Comber 2016, writing must be relevant to children's lives as children, and children's agency, their control over writing tasks; is what propels growth. Similarly what has been discussed by Harun et. al (2018) regarding writing competency among MUET candidates. According to them in their study employed probability sampling method involving undergraduates from Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education (FPTV), Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM), Johor. Data was collected from 500 students who did not achieve Band 3 score from their previous MUET examination through an online questionnaire. Based on the frequency and percentage of the data analysis, 410 students (83%) of the population were very weak in writing skills followed by 150 students who were weak in

speaking skills. Based on the findings, sufficient effort must be taken by the educators to improve students' writing skill competency.

Language Learning Strategies

To elevate students' language learning methods, it is known that they have the discrete practices. It is called as Language Learning Strategies (LLS). Figure 2 shows the classification of LLS since 1975s until today from 3 different authors whom are Rubin (1975), O'Malley (1985) and Oxford (1990). These three prominent researchers have developed and discussed extensively LLS's components based on their expertise.

Rubin (1975) is one of the earliest researchers who researched a variety of learning strategies. According to him, Rubin (1981, cited in Embi, 2000) good L2 learners, are eager and certain guessers, have a strong desire to interact, are always demonstrative, proactive as they are inclined to create opportunities for practices, monitor their own and others' attitude as well as expressions, and pay attention to sense. Similarly, O'Malley, et al (1985) discovered three categories of language learning strategies which are metacognitive, emotional, and social or affective.

Oxford (1990) later classified the strategies into two major categories which are direct and indirect. Memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies are direct strategies that are specifically involved in understanding the target language. Memory strategies deal with storing and retrieving information in a foreign language. The mental processes involved in manipulating, transforming, and communicating with the target language are referred to as cognitive strategies. Learners use compensation strategies to overcome information gaps that prevent them from learning and producing the target language.

Whilst indirect strategies are those that help the students to utilize the language at the optimum level without being specifically linked to the interaction of the language. On the other hand, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies are also included in this category. Planning, monitoring, and assessing the target language are all facets of metacognitive strategies. Affective strategies are methods that learners use to cope with their feelings and outlooks toward language learning. Finally, social strategies are described by their ability to increase target language engagement through interaction with others. To summarise, LLS are distinctive methods of dealing with knowledge that learners practice to improve comprehension, learning, and recollection of knowledge. Learners use LLS to aid in the comprehension of new knowledge and the resolution of language difficulties.

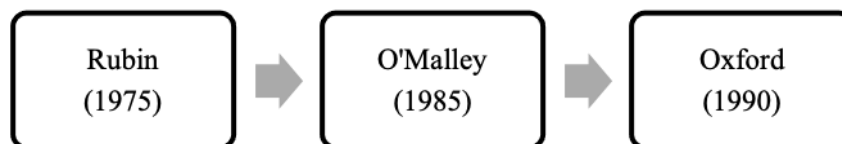


Figure 2 : The classification of language learning strategies

Based on previous studies, it can be determined that different researchers found different results about LLS even though they had used similar language learning analysis. This happens due to students' academic and personal factors. Plus, it is because students are born with different genetic; even their deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) patterns are different.

Moreover, they are also different by thoughts, socio backgrounds, prior knowledge, self-esteem, and ability. However, as opposed to low-performing students, high-performing students used more deliberate and appropriate LLS, (Gani et al., 2015). Different students have different learning styles and different strategies preferences in order for them to further acquire and develop their language learning. Indeed, what suits one learner may be inadequate for another. Hence, educators should be well informed on LLS and fully utilized any instruments to measure students' learning strategy which in this paper it is discussed extensively regarding Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) with the aim to identify students' learning styles. Lessard (1997); Haida et. al (2018) in their papers mentioned on how language learning strategies (LLS) are important because research suggest that training students with language learning strategies can help them to be become better language learners.

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

According to Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), language learning strategies offer a medium which a researcher can collect the data in a summative rating scale. According to Sara et. al (2017), Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) has been the most frequently used language learning strategy questionnaire and the reliability and validity of it has been checked in multiple ways and in various communities (Oxford, 1996). In Malaysia, researchers like Embi (1996) had employed this strategy in his questionnaire and applied this strategy again in his research, Embi and Kaur (2011) to identify learning strategies preference according tot gender.

The instrument with a choice of five Likert-scale responses, students are asked to state their responses or preferences from one to five for each of the statements or questions asked under each strategy. The format aligns with a sizeable collection of systematically vetted questions and proportional benchmark data which makes it ideal for larger questionnaires with multiple items such as Oxford's (1990) SILL questionnaire, (Newson, 2021). Apart from English Language, there are other languages that had adapted the SILL questionnaire for LLS related research. The researchers therefore used SILL questionnaire which was adapted from Oxford (1990) version 7.0 for ESL/EFL learners as the instrument for data collection method.

Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative descriptive research was conducted using the survey method for this study. This research aims to identify the most widely and least used language learning strategies (LLS) among Form 6 students in a secondary school in Sabah. A survey study which involves 30 questions related to the LLS together with Likert Scale was used.

Research Instrument

The instrument used in this study involved a set of questionnaires of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0 that is the version for speakers of other languages learning English. The SILL questionnaire used in this research is adopted from the Oxford (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0 which looks at the participants' frequency of the strategies used in second language learning.

Research Sample

The convenience sampling method was applied in the selection process of the sample for the study. The respondents were 50 Form 6 students from a rural school in Sabah.

Data Collection Method

The data was collected using a 5-point Likert questionnaire modified from Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0, (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). 30 statements were prepared with 5 statements for each category. All the statements were focused on collecting information about how the respondents improve their writing skills. The questionnaire was administered face-to-face during the English language lessons and collected immediately after the students had responded to the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

A descriptive study was implemented for the results of the most and least used language learning strategy by the participants. The mean of each technique in the strategy was calculated and followed by the total mean of each strategy. The study adopted Oxford (1990) categorization of frequency of language learning strategies use as stated below:

Table 1

Oxford's (1990) Conversion on Frequency of the Use of Strategy and Mean Score

Mean Score	Level
1.0 - 2.4	Low
2.5 - 3.4	Medium
3.5 - 5.0	High

Finding and Discussion

After calculating and analyzing the total mean of data gained from questionnaires, it can be known that all respondents used more than one strategy in writing English text. Form 6 students used compensation, social, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and memory strategies in writing English.

Overall Language Learning Strategy used in writing skill

All 50 participants of the Form Six students completed the questionnaire without leaving any unattempted statement. Results on the questionnaire are illustrated in the table below.

Table 2

Overall LLS Used in writing skill

Parts of Learning Strategies Average Interpretation	Mean Score	Level
Memory Strategies	3.70	High
Cognitive Strategies	3.35	Medium
Compensation Strategies	4.21	High
Metacognitive strategies	3.90	High
Affective Strategies	3.90	High
Social Strategies	3.64	High
Overall Language Learning Strategies	3.78	High

It was found that the overall mean score for the language learning strategies was 3.78, which was approximately at a high level. This indicates that overall, the learners are high users of LLS.

Table 2 above also illustrates that respondents used compensation most frequently compared to other types of strategies. The mean score of 4.21 for compensation strategies showed that they were high users of the strategy. This was followed by affective strategies (Mean=3.90=high use), metacognitive strategies (Mean=3.90=high use), memory (Mean=3.70=high use) and social strategies (Mean=3.64). However, they were reported to be moderate user of cognitive strategy (Mean=3.35).

Table 3

Mean Score for Specific Compensation Strategy

The most Frequent Language Learning Strategies used to Improve Writing Skill

Language Learning Strategy	Strategy	Mean Score	Level
Compensation Strategies	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	4.28	High
	I try not to translate word -for -word.	3.58	High
	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	4.52	High
	I look up the correct words in the dictionary.	4.24	High
	I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing	4.42	High
	Total Score	4.21	High

Table 3 describes the statements and mean scores for the most used compensation strategy used among Form 6 students. In compensation strategy, the students comprehended and wrote English text by looking for words in their own language that are similar to new words in English, trying not to translate word-for-word, guessing the unknown words in English, looking up the correct words in the dictionary and using a similar word or phrase that means to deliver meaning. The students' mean scores calculated from questionnaires shows that the strategy mostly used in compensation strategy was guessing the unknown words in English (Mean=3.52) followed by using a similar English or phrase (Mean=4.42), looking for words in their own language that are similar to new words in English (Mean=4.28) and trying not to translate word-for-word (Mean=3.58).

Table 4

Mean Score for Specific Cognitive Strategy

The least frequent language learning strategies used to improve writing skill

Language Learning Strategy	Strategy	Mean Score	Level
Cognitive Strategies	I write new English words in my writing.	3.82	High
	I write the English words I know in different ways.	3.04	Medium
	I write messages or notes in English in order to practice my English.	4.02	High
	I gather information from articles, books, or newspapers to write about a certain topic.	3.54	High
	I write a diary in English.	2.32	Low
	Total Score	3.35	Medium

Table 3 describes the statements and mean scores for the least used cognitive strategy used among Form 6 students. In cognitive strategy, the students write the English words I know in different ways, write messages or notes in English in order to practice their English, gather information from articles, books or newspapers to write about a certain topic and write a diary in English. The students' mean scores calculated from questionnaires shows that the strategy least used in cognitive strategy was writing a diary in English (Mean=2.32). On the other hand, the most used strategy in cognitive writing is writing messages or notes in English in order to practice their English.

Conclusion and Implication

Language learning strategies are crucial for language learners' language acquisition as they directly impact their learning process. The language learning strategies usually comprise actions, procedures, plans, or routines used by the language learners to improve their language acquisitions. This research paper intends to identify the language learning strategies used as well as to identify the language learning strategies most employed by a group of Form Six students in Sabah while acquiring the writing language skill.

This study's findings reveal that the Form 6 students had employed all the six Language Learning Strategies to improve their writing skills. The findings indicate that the Form 6 students had employed the compensation language learning strategy the most and the cognitive language learning strategy the least to improve their writing skills. However, it is unclear whether the learners have employed the strategies knowingly or unknowingly, as it is uncertain whether the language learning strategies were taught to them explicitly or implicitly before. The results also indicate that the Form 6 students had applied several language

learning strategies simultaneously while improving their writing skills and their choice of the language learning strategies relies heavily on their preference, personal beliefs, and language learning goals.

Knowing and identifying the language learning strategies used by their students who are the language learners is significant for the language teachers. This realization would help them achieve the desired results in enhancing their students' language proficiency. By knowing this, the teachers would be able to choose, design, teach, and assess the Language Learning Strategies tailored to their students' requirements and work the best for their students' language learning process.

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