

## Language Learning Strategies Employed By Pupils at a Rural Primary School in Malaysia

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### Abstract

In second language learning, a learning strategy plays an important role in guiding pupils in improving their language skills. Language learning strategies are essential in guiding pupils to reflect on their autonomous learning style. Educators need to have an inclusive overview of the language learning strategies used by second language learners, especially in a rural Malaysian ESL environment in order for pupils to improve on their language acquisition and to be able to reflect on their different learning strategies. Thus, this study aims to identify the language learning strategies employed by pupils at a rural primary school in Selangor, Malaysia. The methodology used is quantitative method which consists of a survey. 52 Year 6 pupils responded to a survey instrument and the data were analysed quantitatively. The purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data. To investigate the learning strategies used by the Year 6 pupils in a primary school in Selangor, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990) was utilised. The 30 items from the Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) were adapted for this study. The major findings obtained from the study show that memory strategy is the most used LLS while social strategy is the least used LLS by the Year 6 pupils in a rural primary school in Selangor in learning the English language. Hence, it is hoped that the findings gained from this research will act as a guide for teachers to imply the suitable language learning strategies in rural schools. Further research can focus on how to empower learners to be more self-directed in their learning especially in rural schools.

**Keywords:** English, Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Rural School, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

### Introduction

Mastering the English language has become increasingly important in today's ever-changing world, as English has become recognised as an international language. It is also used as a second language in many countries. English acts as the first language for certain people and has become the language of instructions and curriculum in many countries (Pazilah, Hashim

and Yunus, 2019). At present, having a good grasp of the English language is an essential skill for the pupils; thus, this has prompted the researchers and educationalists to find methods or ways to create successful language learners. According to Ang, Embi & Yunus (2017), learners learn in various ways and strategies. Language learning strategies are essential in helping pupils to enhance their learning. Hence, the use of learning strategies by the learners will be considered beneficial for their language learning mastery (Hashim et al., 2018).

Oxford (1990) defined language learning strategies as methods used by learners to develop their learning and act as a tool for active, autonomous involvement, crucial for communication competency development. In addition, Oxford (2003) said that independent, autonomous, and lifelong learners could be produced when the learners use language learning strategies. In other words, learning methods vary from one pupil to the next. Hence, each student has their approach and strategy in language learning.

The English language, without a doubt, plays a major role in 21st-century education (Amir, 2018). English is taught as a second language in all Malaysian schools and is a compulsory subject for students in primary and secondary schools. Presently, all levels of education from the primary to tertiary level encourages the mastery of English. The fear and anxiety about low literacy and English language proficiency among Malaysian students has been studied extensively in the Malaysian educational context. (Nor et al., 2019). Amir (2018) also stated that students often fail to learn English because they do not know how to learn it properly. Apart from that, in 21st-century education, there is a steady shift whereby the pupils play an essential role in their learning.

Deriving from a study done by O' Malley and Chamot (1990), it was stated that a competent learner is always conscious of the methods and strategies that they utilized during learning and the reasoning on why the particular strategy appealed to them. Nonetheless, some learners might find it confusing to try all the strategies as not all strategies work the same for everyone since different learners have different learning abilities. It is wrong to assume one shoe fits all size, especially when choosing a suitable strategy to master a language skill and sometimes when learners are not aware of which strategies suitable for them will affect their ability to learn the language. It is very important for learners to know the strategies as when they are not aware of the suitable approach, they might use a strategy that is not suitable and get undesirable results in their learning.

According to Oxford (2016), many studies regarding language learning had placed heavy weightage on focusing the language learning strategies. Certain studies had proven that particular strategies work in supporting the learners to master the language and be competent. The strategies play an essential role in developing learner's proficiency and accuracy in the target language once they are done with school (Wong and Nunan, 2011).

As a result, there are more opportunities to do new studies on the possibilities of learners' usage of language learning strategies. It is hoped that this study will shed new light on the students' understanding of language learning strategy. Concerning the issue above, this paper examines the language learning strategies used by Year 6 pupils in a rural primary school in Selangor to learn English.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- (1) To identify the most practised language learning strategies among Year 6 pupils in a rural primary school in Selangor.

- (2) To identify the least practised language learning strategies among Year 6 pupils in a rural primary school in Selangor.

## **Literature Review**

### *Language Learning Strategies*

Language learning strategies (LLS) are essential to improve their language learning. Many scholars have provided different definitions of the factors and strategies used by the learners. Oxford (1990) defined LLS as specific manners, actions and methods that pupils use to overcome their performance in incorporating, keeping, restoring and utilising the second language. These strategies could also refer to as the conscious effort to improve language proficiency through memory and application of the target language features (Cohen, 1998). Rubin (1987) defined LLS as procedures that needed to apply to foster language learning. Oxford (1990) included cognitive, emotional, and social elements of language learning techniques that could help people improve their language learning abilities and trust. Similarly, Griffiths (2008) emphasised that LLS is the responsive efforts taken to self-regulate their language learning process. Learners were given autonomy to be more accountable in their learning process (Ali, Zaman & Khan, 2018). Hence, language learning is solely dependent on the results of conscious attempts of language learners utilising LLS.

The various classes of language learning methods are categorised in a number of ways. Rubin categorised learning-oriented, communication-oriented, and social-oriented practises into three groups (1987). O' Malley et al. (1985) grouped the LLS into three categories: metacognitive, emotional, and socio-affective interventions. Preparing, monitoring, and assessing instructional experiences are all part of metacognitive techniques. Cognitive strategies are concerned with memorising and practising linguistic information and socio-affective strategies are concerned with social interaction. However, Ellis (1994) have classified two types of LLS, which are cognitive strategies (learners' mastery level of the target language and linguistic knowledge) and metacognitive strategies (learners' communicative competence and consistent practice opportunities)

Regardless, The Oxford classification is generally regarded as the most important research in the field of language learning. LLS was divided into two groups by Oxford (1990): direct and indirect strategies. Direct techniques involve cognitive strategies, reward strategies, and memory strategies. Memory strategies are required to store and retrieve information or knowledge, while cognitive strategies employ and transfigure the target vocabulary. Compensation strategies help learners' understanding and output levels, and memory strategies are required to store and retrieve information or knowledge. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, are divided into metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, which social strategies, and deal with language in an indirect manner. Affective strategies apply to learners' feelings, motivation, and beliefs, while metacognitive strategies associate one's learning processes. This strategy lowers one anxiety and encourages oneself to practice the language. Lastly, social strategies include learners' communication and interaction of the target language with peers.

In short, language learners could adopt and adapt LLS to suit their learning style for successful language learning. The classification of Oxford (1990) could be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

*Language Learning Strategies in Oxford's Taxonomy*

Direct strategies	Indirect strategies
Cognitive strategies	Metacognitive strategies
Compensation strategies	Affective strategies
Memory strategies	Social strategies

**Past Studies on Language Learning Strategy (LLS)**

Many research on language learning methods have been performed in the past, with mixed results all over the world. Muniandy and Shuib (2016) found that metacognitive techniques were the most commonly used technique in Malaysia. Similarly, Santihastuti and Wahjuningsih (2019) found that metacognitive strategies were the most commonly used technique whereby learners have clear goals, plan their learning and promote self-evaluation. Alfian (2018) identified that successful learners employ metacognitive strategies whereas unsuccessful learners employ affective strategies.

On the other hand, Alhaysony (2017) discovered that the learners mostly used cognitive strategies in Saudi Arabia. Ngo Cong-Lem (2019) conducted a study on language learning strategies in a Vietnamese high school. Results showed that metacognitive strategies were the highest strategy utilised by learners whereas affective strategies were the least. A study conducted by Suwanarak (2019) in Thailand discovered that a majority of the learners used cognitive strategies when acquiring new knowledge and information. Different studies done across countries yields different results in LLS context.

Gender contributed a great factor that influenced the LLS usage, particularly in social strategy. There were three studies conducted in exploring the influence of gender on the use of LLS. Basterrechea, Martinez-Adrian & Gallardo-del-Puerto (2017) analysed the compensatory strategy in a semi-private school. It was concluded that females tend to possess a higher LLS strategy. Next, Yang (2018) reported that female learners possessed higher indirect strategies in higher English proficiency levels. Similarly, Jaekel (2018) investigated how does gender contributes to the LLS in secondary education. The results showed that girls used more LLS due to the high internal consistency in Cronbach's test. Hence, gender plays an important role in utilizing the LLS to improve their language proficiency.

As there are numerous studies on language learning strategy generally, only few studies focused on specific language skill. Past studies were done on reading skills in terms of language skills (Quintana, Restrepo, Romero & Cardenas, 2019; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2017; Sanad & Ahmed, 2017; Martinez & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2017). Quintana, Restrepo, Romero & Cardenas (2019) discovered that reading comprehension strategies improve reading skills. Ruiz de Zarobe (2017) reported that the strategy training had a positive impact as it enhances the use of LLS. Sanad & Ahmed (2017) reported that the pupils improved and increase their vocabulary knowledge and comprehension skills due to the LLS and Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

Finally, Martinez and Ruiz de Zarobe (2017) conducted research in a primary school and discovered that using a metacognitive approach increases reading competence and trust. Successful language learners utilise strategies to assist them in improving the language. They plan their goals and work towards them. The primary concern of the majority of the researchers in LLS has been to distinguish strategies utilised by successful language learners in acquiring the second or foreign language (Rubin & Wenden, 1987). Successful learners should be responsible and possess positive attitudes in the language learning process. On the

contrary, unsuccessful learners do not understand what was expected and the importance of learning the language. According to Manzanera Pages (2015). Less engaged pupils spent relatively little time outside of the classroom on language learning, Lack of encouragement and academic achievement contribute to low language learning persistence. In other words, a learner's learning style has a significant impact on his or her techniques. The learners' learning style and attitude distinguish a successful and less successful language learner. Hence, LLS is an effective tool to help pupils bridge their language skills.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This study adopted a quantitative method which consists of a survey method where data was collected through one instrument which is using the questionnaire. This instrument was used to investigate how Language Learning Strategies were used in a rural Selangor school.

### Respondents

The respondents for this study were selected through purposive sampling. According to Patton (2002), the reason for purposeful sampling lies in obtaining cases that are information-rich and in-depth (as cited in Merriam 2009). Therefore, this research focused on a small number of selected respondents with the rationale of gaining richer data. This study consisted of 52 Year 6 pupils in a rural primary school in Selangor and they were selected based on certain criteria. The selection criteria were that the English proficiency level of the pupils must be at least C and B-level from the result of their latest test. Lastly was their accessibility, time and permission before carrying out the research.

### Data Collection Method and Analysis

Data for the study was gathered from using the adapted Strategy Inventory for Language Learning questionnaire.

### *Instrument*

The questionnaire consisted of a set of 30 questions. According to Merriam (2009), this format allows the researcher to acknowledge a situation on the spot, to gain the perception of the respondent and to gain new insights on the topic. The 30 items in the questionnaire were divided into 6 sections:

Table 2

*Description for each part of the questionnaire*

Part	Description
Part A: Question 1-5	Memory Strategies
Part B: Question 6-10	Cognitive Strategies
Part C: Question 11-15	Compensation Strategies
Part D: Question 16-20	Metacognitive Strategies
Part E: Question 21-25	Affective Strategies

Part F: Question 16-20

Social Strategies

The statements were included in the survey questionnaire, and respondents were asked to choose between 'Always', 'Sometimes', or 'Never' based on the statements. The findings were counted and converted into percentage. The 30 items were related to pupils' strategies based on strategies used in learning English as a second language and every category was analysed based on one type of strategy in particular in order to initiate possible subjects that can be relevant with the research questions. The instrument was verified with a peer-checking technique and approved by 2 expert teachers from the Sabak Bernam district to guarantee its validity and reliability in this research.

### Data Collection Procedure

This research was conducted for two weeks through the distribution of questionnaires for the usage of Language Learning Strategies in a rural school in Selangor. 52 Year 6 pupils responded to the questionnaires. The purposive sampling technique was used to collect data. Respondents were told that any personal information they provided would be used solely for research purposes, and that their privacy would be fully covered. The collected data was analysed using Microsoft Excel to find out the most significant and least significant strategy used by the pupils.

### Findings

The segment summarises the study's findings and explains how they relate to the literature. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the respondents.

Table 3

*Characteristic of the Respondents (n=52)*

Characteristics of the respondents	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
- Male	20	38.5%
- Female	32	61.5%

Table 3 indicates that the sample has a greater proportion of female respondents than male respondents. All 52 respondents are aged 12 and they are in their sixth year of primary education. The survey was conducted in one of the rural schools located in Sabak Bernam, Selangor.

Table 4

*The usage of memory strategies by the respondents*

Memory Strategies	Always	Sometimes	Never
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
1. To remember new words, I use them in sentences.	51.9% (27)	34.6% (18)	13.5% (7)
2. I always revise English lessons at home.	30.8% (16)	11.5% (6)	57.7% (30)
3. I remember new words by using rhymes.	59.6% (31)	28.9% (15)	11.5% (6)
4. I remember new words by using flashcards.	88.5% (46)	7.7% (4)	3.8% (2)
5. To remember new words, I like to act them out.	50% (26)	19.2% (10)	30.8% (16)

Table 4 depicts some of the respondents' memory strategies used in learning English. The findings are grouped into three categories: 'Always,' 'Sometimes,' and 'Never'. These sections illustrate the frequency of language learning used by the respondents when learning the language. The highest percentage of memory strategy used frequently to learn English is 88.5% which is respondents like to use flashcards when it comes to remembering new English words. To add on, the majority of the respondents use memory strategy to learn English. Next, to remember new English words, 59.6% of the respondents use rhyme. Apart from that, in order to remember new words, 34.6% of the respondents sometimes use the new words in sentences. Another 28.9% of respondents sometimes use rhyme to remember new English words. However, based on the finding, some percentage of respondents did not use metacognitive strategies. 57.7% of the respondents never revise English lessons at home and in attempt to remember new words, another 30.8% of the respondents never try to act out new English words.

Table 5

*The usage of cognitive strategies used by the respondents*

Cognitive strategies	Always	Sometimes	Never
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
1. I like to start conversation in English.	28.8% (15)	23.1% (12)	48.1% (25)
2. I like to watch English language TV shows.	61.5% (32)	28.8% (15)	9.7% (5)
3. I learn English by writing notes, messages, letters or reports.	9.7% (5)	19.2% (10)	71.1% (37)
4. I read English stories during my free time.	46.2% (24)	26.9% (14)	26.9% (14)
5. I listen to English songs to learn new words.	53.8% (28)	7.7% (4)	38.5% (20)

The above table shows the usage of cognitive strategies by the respondents. 61.5% of the respondents love to watch English language TV shows while another 53.8% of respondents love to listen to English songs in learning new words. In addition, another 28.8% of

respondents occasionally prefer to watch TV shows in the English language just like the majority of the respondents. Furthermore, 26.9% of respondents sometimes uses their spare time to read English stories. On the contrary, 71.1% of respondents dislike English writing tasks such as notes, letters or messages and 48.1% of respondents avoid starting conversation in English.

Table 6

*The usage of compensation strategies used by the respondents*

Compensation strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
1. I use a word or expression that means the same thing if I can't think of an English word.	50% (26)	9.6% (5)	40.4% (21)
2. If I can't think of a word in English, I use gestures.	48.1% (25)	34.6% (18)	17.3% (9)
3. If I don't understand English word, I like to make guesses.	73.1% (38)	19.2% (10)	7.7% (4)
4. I look up every new words when I am reading English books.	17.3% (9)	7.7% (4)	75% (39)
5. I like to predict what the other people will say next.	23% (12)	38.5% (20)	38.5% (20)

Table 6 exhibits the usage of compensation strategies by the respondents. The highest percentage which is 73.1% of respondents like to make guesses if they do not understand the words in English. If they are not able to think of an English word, 50% of the respondents choose to use words that have similar meaning. 38.5% of respondents sometimes believe they can guess what other people will think next. If they are unable to come up with an English word, 48.1% of the respondents use gestures and 75% of the respondents never read English books by looking up every new word.

Table 7

*The usage of metacognitive strategies by the respondents*

Metacognitive strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
1. I listen when someone is speaking in English.	76.9% (40)	9.6% (5)	13.5% (7)
2. I like to learn how to improve my speaking skills.	71.2% (37)	19.2% (10)	9.6% (5)
3. I speak English outside of school.	21.2% (11)	25% (13)	53.8% (28)
4. I do a timetable so I have ample time to learn English.	57.7% (30)	23.1% (12)	19.2% (10)
5. I often find new friends to speak English.	25% (13)	5.8% (3)	69.2% (36)



The above table shows the usage of metacognitive strategies used by the respondents. Based on the finding, 76.9% of the respondents choose to listen when people are conversing in English. Next, in order to learn the language, 71.2% of the respondent always try to improve their speaking skills. Moreover, 28 respondents which is 53.8% never try to use the language outside of the school. However, to have ample time to learn English, 30 respondents which is 57.7% did a timetable. Lastly, 69.2% of the respondents dislike finding new companions to speak English.

Table 8

*The usage of affective strategies used by the respondents*

Affective strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
1. When I'm studying English, I'm stressed and anxious.	76.9% (40)	19.2% (10)	3.9% (2)
2. Despite my fear, I push myself to speak in English.	73.1% (38)	9.6% (5)	17.3% (9)
3. When I'm scared of using English, I try to calm myself.	69.2% (36)	11.5% (6)	19.2% (10)
4. I treat myself if I do well in English.	80.8% (42)	17.3% (9)	1.9% (1)
5. In my notebook, I like to write down my thoughts in English.	7.7% (4)	19.2% (10)	73.1% (38)

Table 8 depicts the usage of affective strategies by the respondents. 80.8% of the respondents always reward themselves if they do well in English, followed by 76.9% of the respondents feel that they are constantly feeling tensed and anxious when learning English. Occasionally, another 19.2% of the respondents also notice that they, too sometimes feel tensed and nervous when learning English. On the contrary, 73.1% of the respondents dislike writing their thoughts in their notebooks. Lastly, 69.2% of the respondents have positive attitudes in calming themselves when they are afraid to use the language.

Table 9

*The usage of social strategies used by respondents*

Social strategies	Always % (n)	Sometimes % (n)	Never % (n)
1. I like to ask questions in English.	9.6% (5)	17.3% (9)	73.1% (38)
2. To learn English, I practise with my companions.	1.9% (1)	1.9% (1)	96.2% (50)
3. I ask people to slow down and repeat if I don't understand.	48.1% (25)	36.5% (19)	15.4% (8)
4. I ask someone good in English to correct me when I talk.	13.5% (7)	11.5% (6)	75% (39)
5. I will ask for help from my English teachers.	19.2% (10)	73.1% (38)	7.7% (4)

The above table shows the usage of social strategies used by the respondents. 48.1% of the respondents prefer to people to slow down and repeat if they don't understand. Apart from that, 38 respondents which is 73.1% sometimes request assistances from their English teachers and another 36.5% of the respondents sometimes ask people to slow down and repeat if they don't understand. However, a majority of the respondents which is 96.2% never practise English with their friends. To learn the language, 75% of the respondents never seek someone who is fluent in English to correct them and 73.1% dislike asking questions in English.

### **Discussion**

*The most used language learning strategy by the Year 6 pupils of a rural primary school in Selangor.*

Based on the data review and the six categories identified by Oxford (1990), it was discovered that the most used language learning strategy is from the memory strategy. The memory strategy entails the following (1) To remember new words, I use them in sentences, (2) I always revise English lessons at home, (3) I remember new words by using rhymes, (4) I remember new words by using flashcards, and (5) To remember new words, I like to act them out. As stated by Oxford (1990), memory strategies are direct strategies that include the mental processes associated with storing new information in memory and retrieving it when needed. Learning a language directly is referred to as a direct strategy (Gumartifa & Agustiani, 2020). Learners use memory strategies to perform tasks such as creating mental connections, using images and sounds, checking for precision, and carrying out actions. Based on the findings, the most specific strategy that 88.5% of respondents are inclined to (4) I remember new words by using flashcards. The respondents come from rural backgrounds. Hence, looking at a flashcard and learning new words interest them more. Thoriq and Kurniawan (2021) posited that flashcards are useful for teaching vocabulary, used as drilling, and can act as a reinforcement. Flashcards are also the easiest medium to help pupils remember words when it comes to learning the language. Learners may have inclined more to this strategy as they are attracted to the colours and learning using the flashcards help them to retain the new information efficiently. Since visuals have a more significant effect on learning and understanding something than verbal/audio, expressing the images found on the flashcard can help enhance children's memory. This impacts on learners as they can quickly understand and remember the words they are learning, and they can easily return the knowledge they have acquired, namely any vocabulary that has been introduced. This is in line with a study conducted in Indonesia by Nugroho et al., (2021) states that flashcards can help retain their newly-learned words and recognize the words easily. However in a recent study done by Lim et al., (2021) in Malaysia states that the Year 6 learners in the suburban town are not keen to use flashcards as their strategies for learning English. This contradicts the findings obtained in this study as the Year 6 learners prefer flashcards to learn new words. This may be due to the difference in background setting as the study is conducted in a rural setting compared to the one which is conducted in uptown areas. This study can be assured that learners still prefer to use memory strategies as their most preferred strategy in learning English. Coming from a rural background, learners prefer to have a medium to help them understand the language better and in this case, the flashcards.

## Research Question 2

*The least used language learning strategy by the Year 6 pupils of a rural primary school in Selangor.*

The finding indicated that the strategies used the least in learning English are social strategies. They are made up of: (1) I like to ask questions in English, (2) To learn English, I practise with my companions, (3) I ask people to slow down and repeat if I don't understand, (4) I ask someone good in English to correct me when I talk, (5) I will ask for help from my English teachers. Oxford (1990) stated that social strategies make enhanced interaction with the target language. Based on the findings, the least specific strategy that 96.2% of the respondents are inclined to (2) To learn English, I practise with my companions. This result is probably due to their surroundings which does not encourage pupils to practice this strategy. Pupils only speak English during the English lesson and since the rest of the pupils are Malay, they choose to converse in Malay both within and outside the classroom. This is parallel to a research done by Maros et al., (2017) in a rural Malay secondary school, who identified that most of them choose to use the Malay language when communicating with their family and friends at home as well as at school. They also converse in their mother tongue with their non-Malay peers who are also fluent in Malay. Zulkefly & Razali (2019) also agreed that students who live in secluded areas have a negative connotation about studying English. As a result, they hardly use the English language. This finding is also similar to Altunay (2014) study which shows in her research that the pupils did not seem comfortable in communicating with others because they have a lack of knowledge in English and the repercussion is pupils have limited exposure to the English language and least chances to practice their speaking skills. Baker (1985) posited that pupils' attitudes about a second or foreign language are influenced by the language they use at home and their cultural influences, such as family and societal support. In a rural surrounding, pupils do not get the support needed from their family and friend to use the language as they do not see the importance of the English language. Thus, this finding can help teachers direct their efforts to promote English language learning activities that pupils' preferred which will help those in rural schools learn better.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to look at the language learning strategies used by Year 6 pupils in a rural school. The finding shows that the pupils prefer using memory strategies in learning English. The findings can shed some light for English teachers on the importance of knowing learners' language learning strategies. As a result, teachers were expected to know how to educate and practice the appropriate techniques that pupils needed to become proficient language learners. The results of this study indicate that there is an increasing need and strong demand for research into language learning strategies especially in rural schools of Malaysia as only a few studies have been published related to rural primary schools. Furthermore, future research should guide unsuccessful language learners to study effective language strategies to learn the language successfully and efficiently. There should also be research into empowering learners to be more self-directed in their learning especially in rural schools. This would assist pupils in learning more effectively and, as a result, improving their English language skills.

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