

Language Learning Strategies used for Reading Skill among Upper Primary ESL Learners

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Abstract

Developing reading skills has transformed improvisation in teaching and language learning strategies worldwide. Implementing reading skills in the classroom will further enhance the pupils' learning experience. Studies have researched numerous language learning strategies in secondary and higher education. However, fewer studies have been conducted on the most and least used language learning strategies to support their reading skills at the upper primary English as a Second Language (ESL) level. This study aimed to identify the most employed language learning strategies among the lower primary ESL learners in reading skills. A mixed-methods research design was used in this study with a modified version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning instrument. A total of 45 upper primary pupils from three primary schools were selected using purposive sampling. The results highlighted that these pupils prefer memory strategies in their reading. On the other hand, the learners' least effective strategy is the affective learning strategy. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct this research on a larger scale in upper primary to enlighten educators on various language learning strategies in designing the curriculum.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, ESL, Reading Skill, Young Learners

Introduction

The interconnection across nations due to rapid globalization necessitates that global citizens be proficient in English to adapt to 21st-century society. This global language has been integrated into the curriculum of many educational institutions worldwide and has become a compulsory subject in most countries. (Onishchuk et al., 2020; Muleya, 2020; Zein et al., 2020; Si, 2019). Therefore, learning English is crucial in order to meet the needs of the rapidly expanding globalization era. According to research, being fluent in English is no longer a choice but a necessity to survive in the fast-paced society of today (Yee & Periasamy, 2019). Malaysia is one of several nations that embrace and modify the current international models and curricula to set the requirements for teaching English as a second language based on global benchmarks (Ni & Yunus, 2022). Ministry of Education reformed the education policy

by aligning the primary and secondary English language curriculum to a global educational policy which is the CEFR a global educational policy (Afip et al., 2019)

CEFR highlights that language teaching should have the strengths and weaknesses of the learners as the focal point to encourage them to achieve their learning goals, with an emphasis on a learner-centered approach (Khair & Shah, 2021). The focus has shifted from what language learners learn or the outcome of the language learning to how they acquire the language, often known as process orientation (Cohen & Henry, 2019). This is where language learning strategies (LLS) come into the picture. These strategies play a crucial role in English language acquisition since identifying the right learning strategy will optimize their learning performance and increase their language competence. Furthermore, by practicing the appropriate LLS in an ESL classroom, pupils will be motivated and have a positive attitude toward learning, which can aid their success in language acquisition (Nair et al., 2021).

Among all the language skills, reading is one of the fundamental components of the entire learning process, as it is the area of education that contributes most to the growth of the intellect (Celik, 2022). It is also regarded as an arduous language skill to be mastered since it requires students to subtly engage with the reading contents using various techniques, including predicting, analyzing, and summarizing (Peter et al., 2023). Hence, language learning strategies for reading skills should be practiced early to enhance their efficiency. Even though substantial academic research has explored language learning strategies in reading skills, there is a gap in the literature on reading strategies among Malaysian primary ESL learners (Gustanti & Ayu, 2021; Zano, 2020; Zakaria et al., 2019; Rajasagaran et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2022). Thus, this study presents the most used language learning strategies for reading skills by 45 students from three urban schools located in Selangor and Pahang. There will be a summary of the results from an interview-supported questionnaire.

Literature Review

Reading Skills for English as a Second Language Learner

Language development has been evolving in the global arena periodically. Reading is one of the most focused skills in teaching. The skill of reading has its own set of challenges and has been refined or fine-tuned from time to time to meet the needs of ESL learners through various language-learning strategies (Ali et al., 2019). Difficulties in reading among Malaysian ESL learners stem from their limitations, which range from learning disabilities to social and demographic backgrounds with their native influences. Studies have shown that interest is critical, and learners have no desire to read as they have much to do with other prioritized activities (Muhamad et al., 2020). Some come from homes where the reading culture needs to be cultivated. Learners' foundation in reading is not solid, as merely being motivated is insufficient, and pupils require some connection to correlate with what is being acquired. Vygotsky's theory implicates learners' associations with previously learned things with new forms of acquired knowledge. It directly implements the improvement of reading fluency and comprehension (Rasakumaran et al., 2019).

The importance of further advancing reading skills among ESL learners has garnered the attention of the Education Ministry of Malaysia to connect parents and schools through various reading skill programs. One of the efforts conducted at the national level in 2016 was the Let's Read Online activity. It was introduced through the HIP Program, or Highly Immersive Program, to evoke the use of the English language at all national school levels (Maszlee, 2019). Exposure to the English language improves reading skills while giving learners, parents, and schools a sense of partnership, accountability, and support. Language learning strategies are

implemented to enhance the performance of ESL learners' reading skills. Various direct and indirect learning strategies specified in reading have been implemented in teaching ESL learners. Past studies have shown that each strategy may differ according to the learners' needs in developing their reading skills (Gustanti et al., 2021). Direct strategies are used to aid in the mental processing of the language. It consists of strategies relating to memory, cognition, and compensation that are steered towards the learner. Indirect strategies are the processes that contribute to language learning. It comprises metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. It allows learners to make decisions and choose efficient ways of learning (Ehrman et al., 1990).

Language Learning Strategies among Second Language Learners

Direct Strategies -Memory Strategi, Compensation Strategy and Cognitive Strategy

The memory strategy is helpful in ESL learners' self-development in reading. Studies have shown that learners can quickly review, absorb, and comprehend vocabulary words in context when they find connections by applying images and sounds from their minds. Learners gain the opportunity to develop their reading skills through the Working Memory Model, according to (Baddley, 1986). Learners can easily retain and interpret newfound information or vocabulary and spontaneously accumulate more words as they develop their reading ability. It also helps them to reserve, reminisce, and remember what they have learned (Ting et al., 2021). Studies have shown that learners remember newfound vocabulary in the context of their personal experience, which generates meaning for themselves. Prior knowledge and past encounters assist in retaining what they have learned. Some techniques to enhance memorization include using realia, teaching aids, gestures, and imagery in pictures or posters, songs, or even games (Masharipovna et al., 2019).

The compensation strategy is another strategy used as a direct method for language learning in reading. It is a tool to fill the gap in situations requiring language acquisition, especially in terms of vocabulary. It covers the limitations of the ESL learner by providing other learning materials or activities that enable them to work adaptably on their own and complete a new task. Examples of activities that represent compensation strategies are miming games, guessing the meaning, or e-reading literature (López-Escribano et al., 2021). It has been shown that these approaches are practical for ESL learners to increase their apprehension of reading literacy (Fathi et al., 2020). Past studies in Malaysia have revealed that when ESL learners access various learning aids and techniques, it accelerates their drive to learn newfound vocabulary (Magasvaran et al., 2021). Due to their motivation to read and their ability to approach challenges in various ways and overcome them depending on their level of competency, they will also become more fluent readers due to this drive.

Cognitive strategies are also a learning strategy that enhances reading comprehension among ESL learners. It is a process where the learner is aware of improvement due to their experience acquiring knowledge (Mayer, 2011). It involves mental activities that sharpen their thinking, reasoning, remembering, imagination, learning new words, and language usage. Findings have shown that teachers must better grasp second language learning acquisition, as most ESL learners have diverse cultural and linguistic influences. The English language exposure is mainly in the context of the classroom-based learning environment (Dawi et al., 2021). Theories have been formed to find ways to bring language proficiency to a greater level. These theories support second language acquisition, such as the acculturation model, sociocultural theory, and Krashen's theory (Friedrichsen, 2020).

Indirect Strategies -Metacognitive Strategy, Social Strategy and Affective Strategy

Metacognitive strategies are one of the most used strategies in reading for ESL learners. It innovates and develops opportunities for learners' involvement in learning, especially for strategic reading. It permits them to be more conscious of how they learn and figure out or discover the skills that benefit them while indirectly making them more motivated and encouraged, thus enabling them to work on their problems independently as they apply the skills they have learned. Based on past studies, planning, monitoring, and evaluating are part of metacognitive strategies (Zhang et al., 2013). These steps have proven to be beneficial in teaching reading comprehension. It enables ESL learners to bring forward questions related to finding the main idea of a text and obtain certain information from supportive details. It is to help better comprehend the reading material in the form of text and the vocabulary involved. Past studies have shown that it has tremendously improved ESL learners' reading skills (Ali et al., 2019). Studies have shown that the strategy helps organize and schedule learning tasks accordingly. Learners can identify their learning styles and need to acquire reading skills.

Social strategies are implemented to enable learners to use them to communicate among themselves in corporate learning. The classroom environment is the best platform to address language-related issues. It is a base for enhancing the language learning process as learners inquire and clarify their doubts through interaction. Studies have shown it also increases learners' productivity as they can source out other learners to solve their problems in language acquisition through reading (Kiew et al., 2020). The Affective strategy in language learning comes to terms with the well-being of a learner from their emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values. This strategy is not as widely used as other strategies. However, it contributes to addressing issues in language, especially in reading skills, which are mainly about managing emotions and balancing out positive and negative feelings and have a certain impact on the ESL learner's language acquisition (Lestari et al., 2020). It can be done through rewards, encouragement, deep breathing, affirmations of positive statements with music, laughter, and many other ways. Research has shown that it reduces anxiety and stress levels only when their needs are met. This form of strategy enables learners to take control of their attitudes and emotions. It also allows learners to accept and communicate openly about their experiences of success and failure. It also gives them room to digest the consequences of their actions. Research shows that this strategy is not highly stressed as teachers resolve anxiety or confusion with task-based practice, which focuses on repetition and memorization (Soupi et al., 2020).

Methodology*Research Designs*

This study used a mixed-methods data gathering and analysis strategy, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques. The researchers used a mixed-methods methodology to gather in-depth, comprehensive, and detailed data (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). This study used a methodological triangulation design, enabling the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Results from quantitative and qualitative data were compared and analysed separately.

Research Instruments

The instrument used to collect data in this research included an online questionnaire that consisted of two parts, a modified questionnaire based on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) and a set of open-ended questions.

Participants

The study participants were 45 upper primary pupils from three different primary schools in Malaysia, ranging from urban to rural schools. The selection of the cohort was done through purposive sampling to ensure all the chosen participants were well informed and understood the purpose of the study itself. In order to minimize bias, each primary school was handled separately by a different researcher, and a maximum of 15 students were selected.

Data collection procedure and Analysis

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of five parts, each focusing on a particular language-learning strategy. Each part contained five Likert scale questions ranging from 1 to 5, asking the participants to agree or disagree with a specific learning strategy. Next, the second section contained six open-ended questions, and the participants needed to write their responses based on their experiences. The questionnaire was set up in Google Forms and sent via Google Classroom. The research objectives were explained before the questionnaire was delivered to the respondents to minimize any risk of misunderstandings among the respondents.

The data collected from the questionnaire filled out by the respondents is analysed using the SPSS program. Descriptive statistics like means, frequency, and percentage are used to analyse the percentage of each learning strategy and the participants' preferences or dislikes. Next, the data from the open-ended questions is analysed and structured based on similar themes or types. Then, the data is tabulated for further analysis.

Findings

Descriptive data

The questionnaire, which was derived from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), sought to identify the language learning approach that students developing their reading skills utilized the most. There are 30 statements in total, five for each method of language learning. The six SILL sub-scales' descriptive data are displayed in the table. Based on guidelines proposed by Zaki and Ahmad (2017), the interpretation of the mean score is tabulated. The degree of perception is very low when the mean score is between 0 and 1.89; 1.90-2.69; low; 2.70-3.49; moderate; 3.50-4.2; and 4.30-5.00; very high (Zaki & Ahmad, 2017).

Table 1

Descriptive data of six SILL sub-scales

	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation of mean score
Memory	1.60	5.00	160.40	3.5644	.68263	High
Cognitive	2.40	5.00	155.40	3.4533	.59452	Moderate
Compensation	1.80	5.00	149.00	3.3111	.68564	Moderate
Metacognitive	2.20	5.00	156.40	3.4756	.70232	Moderate
Social	1.60	5.00	151.00	3.3556	.80441	Moderate
Affective	2.20	5.00	144.40	3.2089	.79081	Moderate

Based on the data tabulated, the most used language learning strategy for reading skills is memory strategy, with a mean score of 3.56 and a standard deviation of 0.68. The total score for this strategy is 160. The interpretation of the mean score is high, as it is above 3.5. The second most used strategy is Metacognitive, with a mean score of 3.47 and a standard deviation of 0.7. The total score for the Cognitive strategy, which is the third most used strategy, is 155.40, with a mean score of 3.4. Their difference in mean score between Metacognitive and Cognitive strategy is 0.02. The fourth and fifth-ranked strategies learners use are the Social and Compensation strategies, with mean scores of 3.35 and 3.3, respectively. The least used strategy is the Affective strategy, which has a mean score of 3.2 and a standard deviation of 0.79. Although the mean scores are almost the same, the most used strategy for reading skills is the memory learning strategy.

Interview Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview was done with all the participants individually to strengthen the data obtained from the questionnaire. The interview took roughly 15 minutes for each session, and the focus was on their favourite strategy while practicing reading activities formally or informally. More information and explanations of the pupils' perceptions were collected. The findings and discussion for each interview question are as below.

Table 2

Data from the interview

Question 1	
Researcher	Do you use any technological devices to help you with your reading? If so, what is it?
Student 2, 14,15,17, 28	Yes, phones
Student 21	Yes, apps dictionary
Student 3, 6, 22, 29, 39	No
Question 2	
Researcher	Do you have people around you to guide you in your English reading? If so, who are they?
Student 6,12,13,14,19,26,34	Yes, my parents and friends.
Student 7,28,33	Tuition teacher
Question 3	
Researcher	Do you have a lot of English reading materials at home or school? (Online materials are accepted.) If so, elaborate on some details.
Student 13, 25, 44	Yes, Novel and Comic
Student 7,38	Yes, YouTube and Smart study
Student 24,34	Storybooks, because they are simple and easy to understand
Question 4	
Researcher	What are some challenges or problems that you face when reading in English?

Student 8,11, 39	Uncommon words or advanced words
Student 6,9,19,27,33,41	Don't understand the meaning of some words
Student 14,35,42	Cannot read fluently
Question 5	
Researcher	What are the goals that you have for improving your reading skills in English?
Student 4,13,27,36,	For a better communication skill
Student 1,13,19	To have a fluent reading
Student 30	IELTS

Data from the first interview question reveals that the learners use applications to understand some words while reading, which shows that they are practicing memory strategies. Some of the applications mentioned are Google Translate, Lingo Kids, and Dictionary apps. However, some students are not using any devices while reading; they might be guessing the words to have an overall understanding. The second interview question explains that most learners have people around them to help them with reading practice, which helps them practice social learning strategies. Nevertheless, some learners responded that there were no people around them to guide them.

Most learners have English materials at home, explaining that they read English outside of school. Some materials mentioned are novels, comics, storybooks, Wikipedia, and learning apps. Some learners mentioned that they have no material at home. While reading English material, the issues faced by most learners are being unable to read fluently and interpreting the meaning of words. When students frequently consult the dictionary to determine the meaning of words, they become demotivated, so they need to use a different technique to maintain their motivation while reading. Apart from that, learners also said that some of their goals for improving their reading are better communication, fluency, and IELTS.

Discussion

Based on the research questions, this paper aimed to determine the most frequent and least used Language Learning Strategies for reading skills among upper primary pupils.

Research question 1: What is the most frequent use of Language Learning Strategies for reading skills among upper primary pupils?

The highest mean score, 3.56, showed that the upper primary pupils are more prone to using memory strategies for reading skills in English. The Oxford Classification of Language Learning Strategies (1990) highlighted that memory strategies are techniques aimed at assisting individuals in enhancing their ability to store and recall knowledge. These methods entail

repetition, categorization, summarizing, and picturing. Research suggests that memory learning procedures could be successful in language learning, especially for vocabulary acquisition (McCauley & Christiansen, 2019). Based on the survey questionnaire findings, the upper primary pupils preferred visual aids and mnemonics to increase their memory performance. Visual aids such as diagrams, charts, and graphs let them picture complex information, making it easier to remember. Mnemonics, which are memory aids that use associations or mental images, help them recall information effectively. The students also used retrieval practice, which required them to actively retrieve information from memory rather than merely examine it. To boost their long-term memory recall, the pupils used flashcards and practiced quizzes.

Several studies have demonstrated that memory language learning procedures positively impact reading proficiency for second language learners. For example, a study by Wang and Lin (2019) indicated that using repetition, summary, and elaboration tactics improved reading comprehension for second language learners. Another study by Cho and Ma (2020) indicated that adopting a visual imagery method increased reading fluency and comprehension for second language learners. The pupils in both studies benefited from the visualization process, which helped them build mental representations of new words or phrases and was helpful in enhancing reading comprehension. Likewise, mnemonic devices have also been demonstrated to help enhance reading skills for second language learners. Another study by Mishbah (2020) indicated that using mnemonics increased vocabulary learning and reading comprehension for young learners. Overall, the research suggested that memory methods are beneficial for second-language learners in improving their reading skills. By adopting this memory strategy, the pupils could better store and recall new information, enhancing vocabulary learning and improving reading comprehension.

Research question 2: What are the least used Language Learning Strategies for reading skills among upper primary pupils?

Based on the mean score results, the least preferred language learning strategies are affective strategies, with a mean score of 3.2 among the upper primary pupils. According to Rebecca Oxford (2021), the value of compelling language acquisition strategies for reading skills in learning a second language cannot be overemphasized because reading is a complicated language skill involving cognitive and affective processes, and affective methods can considerably improve reading comprehension and fluency in second language learning. One of the primary benefits of practical techniques for improving skills in second language learning is that they can boost motivation. Reading in a second language can be demanding, and pupils who have a positive attitude towards reading and believe in their capacity to succeed are more likely to participate in reading activities and continue through obstacles. Strategies such as goal setting, positive self-talk, and visualization can enable pupils to build a positive mindset and enhance their motivation to read in a second language, but these strategies can be a challenge for educators to implement and plan within a short duration.

However, studies found that using affective techniques for reading skills can allow pupils to handle unpleasant emotions and improve coping abilities (Blasi et al., 2019; Dawi et al., 2021; Artigliere, 2019). Generally, these researchers highlighted that anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt could be significant barriers to reading comprehension and fluency, and pupils who manage these emotions are likelier to succeed. So, strategies such as deep breathing, mindfulness, and cognitive restructuring can help pupils manage negative emotions and develop coping skills that can be applied to reading activities. In order to develop a sense of

cultural empathy and awareness, affective strategy plays an essential role in reading (Stambaugh & VanTassel-Baska, 2021). Reading provides an opportunity to learn about the culture and perspectives of the target language, and pupils who can respect and understand these perspectives are better able to comprehend and interpret literature. Strategies such as reflective journaling, cultural exchange programs, and discussion groups can allow pupils to acquire cultural empathy and awareness while enhancing their reading comprehension and fluency (Chan et al., 2022; Grant & Hill, 2020). In conclusion, affective language learning strategies are vital for increasing reading skills when learning a second language. They can improve motivation, manage negative emotions, and foster cultural empathy and awareness, contributing to more effective reading comprehension and fluency.

Conclusion

To summarize, this study discovered the leading language learning strategy used for reading skills among the upper-grade primary ESL learners from a modified questionnaire and an open-ended interview. The results showed that more pupils are more inclined to use memory strategies for reading skills in English, such as visual aids and mnemonics, to increase their memory performance and retrieval practice, which required them to retrieve learning material from their memory. Additionally, pupils are less inclined to adopt effective strategies as they demand a positive attitude towards reading and believe in the pupils' capacity to succeed, which can be challenging to manage for an educator. However, the score difference among the strategies is not distinctive and relatively balanced. Therefore, educators should be aware of striking a balance in applying different strategies among different ESL learners and integrate these strategies appropriately in their lesson plans to ensure every student has the opportunity and the environment to assist them in gaining confidence in learning to read and the skills to be independent in their studies.

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Appendix**Table 1***Questions from the questionnaire*

<p>Part A</p> <p>I connect what I know and the new things I learn in English.</p> <p>I remember a new English word by seeing a picture of when the word can be used.</p> <p>I use words that sound the same to remember new English words.</p> <p>I use cards with words on them to remember new English words.</p> <p>I remember new English words or phrases by remembering where they are on a page, on the board, or a sign.</p>
<p>Part B</p> <p>I enjoy reading English for fun.</p> <p>I read an English passage fast first, then read it slowly again.</p> <p>I look for words in my language that are like new words in English.</p> <p>I find what an English word means by breaking it into parts I know.</p> <p>I make short versions of what I read in English.</p>
<p>Part C</p> <p>To know new English words, I guess the meaning.</p> <p>I use pictures when I don't know a word when I read in English.</p> <p>I make new words if I don't know the right ones in English.</p> <p>I read English without looking up every new word.</p> <p>I try to guess what happens next when I read in English.</p>
<p>Part D</p> <p>I want to learn how to be better at English.</p> <p>I make a plan, so I have enough time to study English.</p> <p>I look for chances to read a lot in English.</p> <p>I have clear goals for making my English skills better.</p> <p>I think about how well I am learning English.</p>
<p>Part E</p> <p>I try to calm down when I feel scared of reading in English.</p> <p>I tell myself to speak English even when I fear making a mistake.</p> <p>I give myself something good when I do well in English.</p> <p>I notice if I am tight or nervous when I study or use English.</p> <p>I talk to someone else about how I feel when I read in English.</p>
<p>Part F</p> <p>If I don't understand something in English, I ask the other person to explain it again.</p> <p>I practice reading in English with other students.</p> <p>I ask for help from people who are learning English.</p> <p>I ask questions in English about what I read.</p> <p>From what I read, I try to learn about how people live in English-speaking places.</p>