

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: Research on language learning strategies in Malaysia has been carried out extensively since mid 1990s. These studies address learning strategies among secondary and under graduate students in Malaysia. These studies have not covered the language learning strategies among primary school students. The main objective of the study was to identify the language learning strategies used by language learners in primary schools. Data was collected using a survey questionnaire with 60 students from two classes of primary 6. The instruments used in this study include a background information questionnaire and a bilingual Language Strategy Use Questionnaire adapted from Language Strategy Use Inventory by Cohen, Oxford and Chi (2002). The adapted version of Language Strategy Use Questionnaire consists of 40 bilingual statements concerning the four major English language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Data was analyzed through mean, frequency, percentage and standard deviation. The findings revealed that primary school students were high users of reading and writing strategies and moderate users of listening and speaking strategies. There were variations in responses with regard to the use of language learning strategies among primary school students. The pedagogical implications of the findings are also discussed.

Keywords: language learning , strategies, primary school students

INTRODUCTION

English is an international language and is used globally all over the world. In Malaysia particularly, English language is considered the second most important language. Despite the decision to introduce Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction in Malaysian schools, the government is committed in maintaining English as a strong second language in the country (Mohd Sofi Ali 2003).

The Ministry of Education of Malaysia has set English language as a compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools. The ministry aims to extend learners' English language proficiency in order to meet the students' needs in everyday life and for knowledge acquisition (KPM 2001). English, particularly in primary education, aims at providing students with the essential English language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, and knowledge of grammar to enable them to communicate (orally and in writing) in and out of school for different purposes and in different situations (KPM 1995).

Although English is taught as a second language, the standard of English has deteriorated over the years. Politicians, academicians and parents are concerned with the declining standard of English proficiency among students at all levels of education in Malaysia namely primary, secondary and tertiary level students (Dean 1991). Thus, measures should be taken to raise the standard of English in Malaysian schools. In this regard, studies designed to investigate language learning strategies employed by school students learning English in the

Malaysian context play a significant role. The understanding of what students do in the language learning process and how it affects language success is important in assisting students in learning the English language (Mohamed Amin 2000; Mohamed Amin & Mohd Zaki 2010).

According to O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo (1985) language learning strategy is an extremely powerful learning tool. The term language learning strategy has been defined diversely by many researchers. For instance, Wenden and Rubin (1987) defined learning strategies as steps, plans and routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information. On the other hand, Richards and Platt (1992) stated that language learning strategies are intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information.

In this study, the researchers aim to investigate the language learning strategies employed by primary school students within the age of 11 and 12 years old. There is a need for research to be carried out in the language learning field particularly among primary school students as primary school students differ from secondary and undergraduate students psychologically and socially. Concurrently, Gursoy (2004) proposed that the identification of language learning strategies among different age groups is vital and needs consideration in the field of language learning strategies.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are to examine the frequency of language learning strategies use according to listening, speaking, reading and writing skills as well as to identify the overall language learning strategies used by language learners in a primary school.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to determine the language learning strategies used by primary six English language learners in a school. This study employed a quantitative method in collecting and analyzing data. The researchers have selected a total of 60 respondents from two classes of primary 6, consisting of 30 male students and 30 female students as the samples for this study. The age of the respondents in the study ranged from 11 to 12 years old. These respondents have been exposed to the target language for six years in this school learning English as a Second Language.

The instruments used in this study include a background information questionnaire and a bilingual Language Strategy Use Questionnaire adapted from Language Strategy Use Inventory by Cohen, Oxford and Chi (2002). The bilingual version of Language Strategy Use survey has been developed by Yoong Li Kuen (2010) and later translated by the experts in 'Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia'.

The adapted version of Language Strategy Use Questionnaire consists of 40 bilingual statements concerning the four major English language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. There are ten statements for each language skill. This instrument has a strong reliability level as the Cronbach alpha coefficient is .91 (Yoong 2010). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 is used in this questionnaire. The 5-point Likert scale is (1) Never true of me, (2) Usually not true of me, (3) Sometimes true of me, (4) Usually true of me and (5) Always true of me. The data was coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 11.5).

FINDINGS

To determine the frequency of language learning strategies used, an interpretation mean score was employed. Students' responses were categorized into three categories, which is high, moderate and low frequency use of language strategy. Table 1 shows the frequency ratings for strategy use. These ratings were adapted from Oxford (1990).

Table 1: Frequency Ratings for Strategy Use

Frequency of use	Responses	Mean scores
High	Always true of me	4.5 – 5.0
	Usually true of me	3.5 – 4.4
Moderate/medium	Sometimes true of me	2.5 – 3.4
Low	Usually not true of me	1.5 – 2.4
	Never true of me	1.0 – 1.4

Table 2 describes the listening strategies used by primary school students. Primary school students frequently ask for clarifications if they do not understand the first time, ask speakers to repeat if it is not clear, listen for key words, try to predict what the other person is going to say and listen to talk shows and watch television to improve their listening skills. It can be summarized that primary school students in this school are moderate frequency users of the listening strategy as there are 5 high frequency mean scores and 5 medium frequency mean scores shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Listening Strategies used by Primary School Students

Rank	Item No.	Individual strategy	Mean	Frequency
1	A9	Ask for clarification if I do not understand it the first time around.	3.88	High
2	A8	Ask speakers to repeat what they said if it wasn't clear to me.	3.72	High
3	A6	Listen for key words that seem to carry the bulk of the meaning	3.65	High
4	A5	Try to predict what the other person is going to say based on what has been said so far.	3.62	High
5	A1	Listen to talk shows on the radio, watch TV shows or movies in the English language	3.57	High
6	A10	Draw on my general background knowledge to get the main idea.	3.40	Moderate
7	A7	Try to understand what I hear without translating it word-for-word	3.32	Moderate
8	A2	Listening to people who are speaking in English and try to understand what they are saying	3.30	Moderate
9	A4	Pay special attention to specific aspects of the language	3.30	Moderate
10	A3	Practice sounds in the target language that are different from sounds in my own language	3.18	Moderate
		MEAN	3.49	Moderate

Table 3 displays the speaking strategies used by primary school students. Primary school students frequently ask for help from their friends, plan in advance what they want to convey and encourage others to rectify their speaking errors to develop their speaking skills. Primary school students in this school are mostly moderate frequency users of the speaking strategy as there are only 3 high frequency mean scores and 7 medium frequency mean scores shown in Table 3

Table 3: Speaking Strategies used by Primary School Students

Rank	Item No.	Individual strategy	Mean	Frequency
1	B9	Ask for help from my conversational partner	3.73	High
2	B5	Plan out in advance what I want to say.	3.68	High
3	B8	Encourage others to correct errors in my speaking.	3.67	High
4	B1	Practice saying new expressions to myself	3.48	Moderate
5	B3	Initiate conversations in the target language as often as possible	3.43	Moderate
6	B6	Ask questions as a way to be involved in the conversation	3.35	Moderate
7	B10	Make up new words or guess if I don't know the right ones to use.	3.32	Moderate
8	B2	Practice new grammatical structures in different situations to build my confidence level in using them.	3.27	Moderate
9	B7	Try topics even when they aren't familiar to me.	3.20	Moderate
10	B4	Direct the conversation to familiar topics	3.18	Moderate
		MEAN	3.43	Moderate

Table 4 shows the reading strategies used by primary school students. Primary school students use a dictionary frequently, read a story or dialogue several times, try to guess meaning using clues from the contexts, skim and scan an academic text, find appropriate reading materials, read as much as possible in English and pay attention to text organization to enhance their reading skills. Primary school students in this school are high frequency users of the reading strategy as there are 7 high frequency mean scores and 3 medium frequency mean scores shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Reading Strategies used by Primary School Students

Rank	Item No.	Individual strategy	Mean	Frequency
1	C10	Use a dictionary to get a detailed sense of what individual words mean	4.62	High
2	C5	Read a story or dialogue several times until I understand it.	3.83	High
3	C9	Guess the approximate meaning by using clues from the context of the reading material.	3.82	High
4	C4	Skim an academic text first to get the main idea and then go back and read it more carefully	3.62	High
5	C3	Find reading material that is at or near my level	3.58	High
6	C1	Read as much as possible in the target language	3.58	High
7	C6	Pay attention to the organization of the text, especially headings and subheadings.	3.53	High
8	C8	Make predictions as to what will happen next	3.47	Moderate
9	C2	Try to find things to read for pleasure in the target language	3.38	Moderate
10	C7	Make ongoing summaries of the reading either in my mind or in the margins of the text.	2.90	Moderate
		MEAN	3.63	High

Table 5 shows the writing strategies used by primary school students. Primary school students frequently use reference materials, review their work before writing and revise their writing to improve their English. Primary

school students in this school are high frequency users of the writing strategy. There are 3 high frequency mean scores and 7 medium frequency mean scores shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Writing Strategies used by Primary School Students

Rank	Item No.	Individual strategy	Mean	Frequency
1	D7	Use reference materials such as a glossary, a dictionary, or a thesaurus to help find or verify words in the target language	4.30	High
2	D6	Review what I have already written before continuing to write more	4.07	High
3	D9	Revise my writing once or twice to improve the language and content	3.95	High
4	D10	Try to get feedback from others, especially native speakers of the language.	3.42	Moderate
5	D8	Wait to edit my writing until all my ideas are down on paper	3.42	Moderate
6	D1	Practice writing the alphabet and/or new words in the target language	3.40	Moderate
7	D4	Take class notes in the target language as much as I'm able.	3.35	Moderate
8	D5	Find a different way to express the idea when I don't know the correct expression	3.33	Moderate
9	D2	Plan out in advance how to write essays by writing an outline of the essay first	3.32	Moderate
10	D3	Try writing different kinds of texts in the target language	3.20	Moderate
		MEAN	3.57	High

Table 6 reveals the overall frequency of language learning strategy use among primary six students.

Table 6: Frequency of Language Learning Strategy

Skills Category	Mean Score	S.D	Frequency	Rank
Listening	3.493	.337	Moderate	3
Speaking	3.431	.401	Moderate	4
Reading	3.633	.437	High	1
Writing	3.575	.400	High	2

Based on data shown on Table 6, the frequency of students using language learning strategy ranges from moderate to high. Reading strategy ($M = 3.633$, $S.D = .437$) is the most frequently used strategy while speaking strategy ($M = 3.431$, $S.D = .401$) is the least frequently used strategy among primary 6 students. Most primary six students employ reading and writing strategy more frequently as primary six teachers emphasize these skills more than the listening and speaking skills in the classroom. Reading and writing being the most frequently used strategy, with means 3.633 and 3.575 respectively, demonstrates that these strategies are related to exam strategies. Listening and speaking strategies are emphasized less in classrooms.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Primary school students use reading strategy most frequently ($M = 3.633$, $S.D = .437$), followed by writing strategy ($M = 3.575$, $S.D = .400$) and listening strategy ($M = 3.493$, $S.D = .337$). The least frequently used strategy is the speaking strategy ($M = 3.431$, $S.D = .401$). Reading and writing strategies are frequently used in the classrooms by students since they are exam oriented strategies. Listening and speaking strategies are less emphasized in the upper primary classrooms, so they are least frequently used by students. Furthermore, primary school students prefer to speak in their own mother tongue as they can comprehend better in their own language compared to English.

Based on the findings reported above, the most frequently used strategy was item C10: Use a dictionary to get a detailed sense of what individual words mean (reading strategy; $M = 4.62$), while the least used strategy was item C7: Make ongoing summaries of the reading either in my mind or in the margins of the text (reading strategy; $M = 2.90$). Primary school students may still be lacking in their language acquisition therefore they use a dictionary very often in the classrooms to build up their vocabulary in English. Primary school students do not know how to write summaries thus item C7 is least frequently used by students.

The role of a teacher should be adjusted from a mere language teacher to a facilitator who encourages students' active participation in the teaching and learning process (Kamarul et al 2009). Teachers should increase students' awareness of language learning strategy use and combine strategy training with their daily teaching to help students increase their proficiency in English (Zhou 2010).

This study discloses that listening and speaking strategy is least frequently used by primary school students due to their limited vocabulary and low self esteem. Therefore, primary school teachers should try to create a fun and lively atmosphere in learning English through games or role playing and at the same time, provide students with an opportunity to take part in social activities to improve their speaking and communicative skills (Zhou 2010). Students need to experiment with a variety of strategies to promote creative and communicative learning (Oxford & Nyikos 1989). Students will not only benefit from strategies they are currently using, but also from other range of language learning strategies.

Besides that, awareness-raising sessions on language learning strategies should be introduced in the classrooms. Awareness-raising sessions will be beneficial for students who are not aware of their use of language strategies. Awareness on language learning strategies could help students become more confident and self directed language learners (Kamarul Shukri & Mohamed Amin 2010). Students who are active but ineffective users of the strategies can be given training on proper use of strategies by their teachers (Zhou 2010). Consequently, primary school students will gain confidence and proficiency in English language through appropriate use of language learning strategies.

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