

A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON THE POST-SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

One of the factors that determines students' success in learning a language, is through their correct choices of strategy used. The study aims at identifying the students' language learning strategies. The respondents were 48 diploma students from two different diploma programmes which are Diploma in Polymer Science and Diploma in Sports Recreation. The researcher adapts Edvardsdóttir's (2010) questionnaire in acquiring the information needed for the study. The findings reveal that students from both programmes preferred guessing from context, asking their classmates, using google and using an on-line dictionary. On the other hand, they rarely seek their lecturer's help in finding the meanings of words and they would rather seek others help. Future research should consider the use of a semi-structured interview with the respondents as to find the reasons why they preferred some strategies as compared to the others.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, Language learning styles, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Research on learning strategies in general and language learning strategies has become popular to identify learners' strategy preference in their learning. This is because there is no single method that can guarantee learners' success in their L2 or FL language learning regardless of the teaching methods employed by teachers. It all depends on learners themselves in their learning strategies on what strategies they employ to enhance their learning. Due to this, researchers have then shifted their research from teaching methods to language learning strategies used by learners (Chang, Liu & Lee, 2007). Research on language learning strategies initially started from Rubin (n.d.) where she previously studied on teaching on how to be a good teacher in early 50s. Only after the late 50's and early 60s she concentrated on what makes language learning successful. Early 1970s then she began studying language learning process. Besides, a lot of controversies arise after the introduction of language learning strategies by Rubin and Stern (1975) and Naiman et al (1978). Their studies concentrated on identifying lists of strategies. Only in 1980's the emphasis was on the classification of language learning strategies whether they are direct or indirect strategies (Rubin, 1981), cognitive, metacognitive or social strategies (O'Malley et. al, 1985). In 1990, Oxford introduced Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which has been used widely by many researchers.

Language learning strategies cannot be observed, but can only be inferred from learners' learning behaviour. According to Ellis (1986, p. 14), "It is a bit like trying to work out the classification system of a library when the only evidence to go on consists of the few books you have been allowed to take out". Therefore, the phenomena in learners' language learning strategies involved need to be recorded and interpreted by devising a means to do so. Over the years, varieties of approaches have been employed by different researchers in order to get data on good language learners and what they do which makes them more successful as compared to other language learners who are slower.

Findings from research may help instructors vary their teaching methods to suit learners different ability, learning strategies and background. Learning strategies according to Nunan (1991:168), "are the mental processes which learners employ to learn and use the target language." Ellis (1997; 76) defines learning strategies as "The particular approach or techniques that learner employs to try to learn an L2."

In addition, Chamot (2004) defines learning strategies as conscious thoughts and actions that learners employ to achieve their learning goal. Metacognitive knowledge that learners have help them in their thinking and learning approaches on tasks they need to perform based on their ability to integrate strategies that suit their learning strengths and the demand of the task. Most learning strategies according to Chamot are unobservable. Chamot further states that self-report could be used to identify language learning strategies even sometimes learners may not be sincere in their report, yet that is still the only way to identify their mental processing. Scarcella and Oxford (1992, p.63) define learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques --such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning."

Oxford (2003) believes that, "Language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how –and how well –our students learn a second or foreign language." Oxford further states that strategies learners choose that fit their learning styles will become helpful in their learning. Oxford classifies learning strategies into six groups namely cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective and social. The following summarizes Oxford (1990) as cited in Oxford (2003) six major groups of Oxford learning strategies. They are the cognitive strategies which are the mental strategies that enable learners to manipulate materials in direct ways to make sense of their learning, metacognitive strategies that help learners regulate their learning in order to manage their learning process, memory-related strategies that involve creating mental linkage, applying images and sound, reviewing and employing action in their learning. Moreover, Oxford's compensatory strategies involve guessing intelligently and overcoming their limitations in speaking and writing. Affective strategies concern with learners emotional requirements. For example, reducing their anxiety, supporting themselves and taking their emotional temperature. Finally, social strategies that involve cooperating and empathizing with others.

2.0 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Using a quantitative approach, this study tries to explore students' language learning strategies in learning new words in English.

3.0 BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Language learning strategies among native speakers

Numerous studies on language learning strategies have shown different styles preferred by learners in their learning. Among the earliest study is by Rubin (1975) that finds successful language learners were determined in their learning whereby they had a strong desire to communicate with others, were willing to adopt guessing strategies when they were unsure of the correct answers and were not afraid of trying. These good language learners also practised and monitored their own learning as well as those around them. Rubin further stated that factors such as target language proficiency, situational cultural differences and age did contribute to the employment of the strategies by learners.

Another early research by Naiman, Frochlich, Stern & Todesco (1978) revealed that good language learners were able to adapt to learning styles. In addition, they were also actively engaged in the language learning process besides were aware of the language function as a system of rules and also as a means of communication among people. These learners were also constantly working on improving themselves because language learning requires great determination and effort.

Nunan (1995) conducted a study to 60 students in a 12 week programme. The program had the objectives among others are to help learners reflecting on their own learning, develop their own knowledge of the learning strategies, assess their own progress and apply their language skills outside their classroom surrounding. The study further enhanced the idea that any language classrooms should have a dual- focus that include teaching both content and also the awareness of the language process.

In addition, a small small-scale action research study was conducted by Forbes & Fisher (2018) to examine how an explicit focus on metacognitive strategy use within secondary school foreign language lessons impacts pupils' confidence and proficiency in speaking. Participants were the Advanced Level learners of French in a secondary school in England whose age ranges from 16 to 17 years old. Data were collected from questionnaires, interviews, strategy checklists and assessment marks collected both before and after a six-week period of strategy instruction. The findings indicate that the use of learning strategies seems to have had a positive impact on proficiency in speaking pupils' and confidence. After the intervention, the respondents showed improvement how much they both valued and used a range of metacognitive

To conclude, in a language learning process, learners use different strategies and some of these factors like learning style, personality and life experience affect their way of learning the language. Different learners employ different language learning strategies and they should also be trained and guided to use and develop the strategies in order to become successful learners.

3.2 Language learning strategies among non-native speakers

Patil and Karekkati (2012) on their study on 60 engineering students from four engineering colleges in India find these students have higher preferences for metacognitive, cognitive, compensatory and social strategies. Memory and affective strategies were less used by them. These students were also unaware of the language learning strategies and how they can best used these strategies in their learning. Their study that used SILL questionnaire version 7 (Oxford, 1990) also reveals that some students have lack of confidence, anxious and are shy in their learning.

Izawati @ Siti Zawiyah (2012) on her study on strategies employed by Malay and non-malay polytechnic learners in learning English language finds non-malay learners employed more language learning

strategies than Malay learners and they employed more indirect strategies (meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies) than direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation strategies). Both learners use more social and cognitive strategies in learning English. Both groups of learners use least of memory strategies. A structured interview based on Oxford (1990) and M. Amin (2000) questionnaires were used to elicit responses from the respondents. Findings of her study contradict from Politzer's (1983) . Politzer reported Asian students preferred rote strategies like memorization and Hispanic students used more social interactive strategies. This is due to the development of internet where students are socially connected on line.

Manprit Kaur & Mohamed Amin Embi (2011) studied the relationship between language learning strategies and gender among primary school students. They identified and compared LLSs used by male and female primary school students. 60 students from 2 classes of primary 6 (30 male and 30 female) students involved in the study. A survey questionnaire which was adapted from Language strategy use inventory by Cohen, Oxford and Chi (2002) was used in their study. Mean, frequency and t-test were used to analyze data. The finding shows that female students used the overall LLSs more often than male students. Melvina (2018) on her study on 34 eight grade students in Bandung finds that these students were moderate users of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In her study, she employed survey questionnaires adapted from Cohen, Oxford, and Chi (2002). These students preferred reading strategies the most while speaking strategies were employed less by them. She also suggested that the research on language learning strategies should not be stopped so as to help the learners to be successful in their English language learning.

4.0 RESEACH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participants

48 respondents from two programmes which are Diploma in Polymer Science (7 male and 14 female) and Diploma in Sports Recreation (10 male and 17 female) participated in the study. There were 24 male and 24 female students. Their age is 18 years old (fresh school leavers). They have been studying English for 11 years during their primary and secondary schools.

4.2 Instruments

The researcher adapts Edvardsdóttir's (2010) questionnaire in acquiring the information needed for the study. There were 8 questions on different language learning strategies preferred by the participants. The participants were asked to rank the language learning strategies according to their preference. Four likert-scales were used from 4 (always use it) to 1 (never use it) to identify their degree of frequency in using the strategies.

The questionnaires were distributed during a normal class hour and it took about 10 minutes of the participants' time to answer Part A (demographic information on the participants) and Part B (preferred Language Learning Strategies).

5.0 FINDINGS

Table 1 Results for Diploma in Polymer Science students on their Language Learning Strategies

		Degree of frequency			
		1	2	3	4
A	Guess from context	0	19%	33%	48%
B	Ask a classmate in class	0	33%	38%	29%
C	Ask the lecturer	10%	57%	28%	5%
D	Look up in a bilingual dictionary	5%	19%	52%	24%
E	Google it	0	19%	48%	33%
F	Use on-line dictionary	10%	29%	42%	19%
G	Skip it	14%	71%	10%	5%
H	Do something else (Please specify)	24%	38%	19%	19%

4= always use it 3= often use it 2= sometimes use it 1= never use it

From table 1, 45% of the respondents always use the guessing strategies, 33% often use it and 19% sometimes use it. As for asking their classmate, 38% of the respondents often use it, 33% sometimes use it and 29% always use it. Some students preferred not to ask their lecturer (10%) when they have difficulties finding meanings for new words and majority of them sometimes ask their lecturer (57%). A small percentage of 4% of the respondents ask their lecturer for help. This shows that they prefer to seek others help especially their classmates than asking their lecturer.

They also preferred to look up the meanings in a bilingual dictionary. 52% of the respondents often use this strategy to find meanings of words and 24% always use it. 5% of the respondents never use a bilingual dictionary. In addition, 14% of the respondents never skip the word when they do not know its meaning, 5% of the respondents skip the word that they do not understand the meaning. As for googling majority of the respondents (48%) often use google to find meanings of the words and 33% always use it. It seems that these respondents depend on google for information since everyone used google for meanings of words (0% for never use it). For using an on-line dictionary, majority of the respondents often use it (42%) and 10% of the respondents never use it.

Moreover, under the category 'doing something else', 24% of the respondents never use this strategy, 38% sometimes use it and 19% often use it. The remaining 19% also goes to always use it. The other reasons given by the students under the category 'do something else' are looking for clues in the same sentence or paragraph to find the meaning of word, jotting down the word in their note book and try to find the meaning later because the students are too lazy to find the meaning while reading, using an alternative way such as asking someone who is intelligent. Besides, some students wait for their other friends to ask the lecturer and some read many times until they get the meaning of the word from context and some translate the word to L1. Besides, they also ask people on social media, ask parents, find synonyms and also use an English-English dictionary.

Table 2 Results for Diploma in Sport Recreation students on their Language Learning Strategies

		Degree of frequency			
		1	2	3	4
A	Guess from context	0	22%	45%	33%
B	Ask a classmate in class	4%	15%	44%	37%
C	Ask the lecturer	15%	44%	22%	19%
D	Look up in a bilingual dictionary	8%	44%	33%	15%
E	Google it	0	15%	59%	26%
F	Use on-line dictionary	4%	26%	44%	26%
G	Skip it	48%	37%	11%	4%
H	Do something else (Please specify) _____	70%	11%	15%	4%

4= always use it 3= often use it 2= sometimes use it 1= never use it

Table 2 depicts the results on language learning strategies by Diploma in Sport Recreation students. The findings reveal that 45% of the respondents often use guessing strategy, 33% always use it and 22% sometimes use it. From this strategy, it can be concluded that all students use this strategy in their learning. The same goes to using google. All respondents use google to help them in their language learning with majority 59% often use it, 15% sometimes use it and 26% always use it.

Moreover, for these respondents majority of them do not skip the word when they do not understand its meaning. Only 4% stated that they never use this language learning strategy. In addition, 8% of the respondents never look up the meaning of the word in a bilingual dictionary. Majority of the respondents (44%) sometimes refer to the bilingual dictionary, 33% often use it and 15% always use it. As for the on line dictionary, 4% of the respondents never use it with the majority 44% (often use it).

Asking the lecturer is the least favoured language learning strategy as compared to asking the classmate. 15% of the respondents were reported never consulted their lecturer as compared to only 4% who never referred to their classmates. For using the on-line dictionary, 4% of the respondents were reported as never use it, 26% always use it, 44% often use it and 26% sometimes use it.

Under the category 'do something else' majority of the respondents (70%) were reported never use it. It shows that students do not really make an effort to find other language learning strategies in learning words besides the ones explored in this paper. Only a small percentage of 4% were reported as always find other ways in helping them with language learning strategies.

The strategies which were mentioned employed by these Sport Recreation students under the category 'do something else' are looking at other sentences that contain clues to help them guess the meaning of the word, asking their friends on-line, asking others through social media, asking their brother, asking their sister and also asking their parents to help them find the meaning of the unknown words.

To conclude, when comparing these two programs, it shows that Diploma in Science Polymer students adopt more other strategies as compared to the ones mentioned in the questionnaire. Furthermore, many of the Sport Recreation students have the highest percentage for not adopting other strategies. In other words, they do not adopt other strategies to find meanings of the words as compared to the Science Polymer students.

6.0 DISCUSSION

The result from the respondents from both programmes shows that majority of them preferred to ask their classmates than their lecturers. One of the possible reasons might be because the lecturer encourages and prefers the students to communicate in English. Because of this reason, students with low proficiency in English tend to keep quiet. Abdul Majeed (2013) in his research finding on a study on “perception of lecturer-student interaction in English medium science lectures” also mentioned that less proficient learners tend to keep quiet rather than asking others to help them in their learning.

Due to this reason, they tend to seek others help. These students seldom communicate in class in English outside or inside the classrooms as they favour and feel more comfortable using their mother tongue communicating with others. The same finding was revealed by Wu (2010) on the researcher’s study to Taiwanese students’ language learning anxiety and learning strategy in communicative English language teaching classrooms.

In addition, the respondents from both programs do use the google application to find meanings of the words where the percentage for ‘never use it’ is 0%. This might be due to the advancement of technology nowadays that allows them to get access to the internet. They prefer to find answers from the internet than carrying their printed big bulky dictionary.

Finally, it can be concluded that the respondents are aware of the different language learning strategies and they actually adopt these strategies in their language learning. However, they need to be made aware of the other learning strategies which they might not be familiar like using visual images and also compensation strategies in order to help them become autonomous learners without depending a lot on others in learning the English language.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The study aimed at investigating the respondents’ language learning strategies. Based on the findings, students are aware of the strategies mentioned. However, these respondents were not aware of the other strategies that they might use in their language learning as they had difficulties mentioned the other strategies employed by them. The respondents’ preferred to seek other’s help than their lecturer.

They are more comfortable seeking help from other people like their classmates and some consult their siblings and their parents. Some are consulting others through their social media communication.

Suitable learning strategies may help learners in learning and mastering their L2 as the world now has become more challenging and demands these learners to master and have a good command in their L2 to further succeed in their study and the work place letter. Therefore, these respondents should be made aware of the other strategies that they can employ and the lecturers themselves may also introduce and coach these students to adopt other strategies so that they may become autonomous learners later.

8.0 LIMITATION

Since the sample size is small, the study cannot be generalized beyond the Diploma level as the study sampling is purposive sampling based on convenience whereby only two diploma programmes involved. “One can never be totally certain that the sample matches the target population,” (Lan, 2005)

9.0 RECOMMENDATION

Further study should include a semi-structured interview with the respondents as to further investigate the reasons why they preferred some strategies as compared to the others. In addition, more information can also be gathered on the other strategies preferred by them.

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