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LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY
PERMATApintar GIFTED STUDENTS

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STRATEGI PEMBELAJARAN BAHASA YANG DIGUNAKAN OLEH PELAJAR PINTAR BERBAKAT PERMATApintar

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TESIS YANG DIKEMUKAKAN UNTUK MEMPEROLEH
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.



5 September 2013


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ABSTRACT

Language learning strategies employed are one of the factors that affect how individual learners learn a language. This study investigated the English language learning strategies used by gifted students from PERMATApintar National Gifted Centre located at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. It also looked at the variation of language learning strategies used in terms of cognitive style, gender and language proficiency. This is a survey study that utilized quantitative and qualitative methods. Data were collected using questionnaires on 104 gifted students and semi structured interview with six gifted students. The Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford was used to identify students' language learning strategies use while Group Embedded Figure Test (GEFT) by Witkin, Oltman, Raskin and Karp was used to identify students' cognitive styles. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that gifted students used more indirect than direct strategies particularly metacognitive strategies. Female gifted students were more frequent user of strategy than male students based on the total mean scores. As for cognitive style, field dependent learners showed higher total mean scores of language learning strategies compared to field independent learners. Furthermore, in terms of language proficiency, intermediate proficiency students employed more language learning strategies in comparison to high and low language proficiency students. Findings from the interview gained insight into gifted students' difficulties in language learning and how they overcame those problems. It was revealed that speaking in the target language was the main problem faced by most gifted students. They employed conventional strategies such as using dictionary and doing exercises to overcome their language weaknesses. LLS have many potential benefits to offer to educators, teachers, and students. Findings of this study gained useful insight into language learning of PERMATApintar gifted students that can be used to develop specific approach for serving the needs of these students to enhance their potential in language area.





STRATEGI PEMBELAJARAN BAHASA YANG DIGUNAKAN OLEH PELAJAR PINTAR BERBAKAT PERMATAPintar

ABSTRAK

Strategi pembelajaran bahasa adalah salah satu faktor yang mempengaruhi bagaimana seseorang pelajar mempelajari bahasa. Kajian ini mengkaji penggunaan strategi pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris oleh pelajar-pelajar pintar berbakat dari Pusat PERMATAPintar terletak di Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Ia juga melihat kepelbagaian penggunaan strategi pembelajaran bahasa pelajar dari segi gaya kognitif, jantina dan tahap penguasaan bahasa pelajar. Kajian ini merupakan kajian tinjauan menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Data dikumpul menggunakan soal selidik terhadap 104 pelajar tahap satu dan temu bual separa berstruktur dengan enam orang pelajar. Soal selidik *Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL)* dari Oxford digunakan untuk mengenalpasti strategi pembelajaran bahasa pelajar manakala dan *Group Embedded Figure Test (GEFT)* oleh Witkin, Oltman, Raskin dan Karp digunakan untuk mengenalpasti gaya kognitif pelajar. Data dianalisa menggunakan statistik deskriptif. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar pintar berbakat menggunakan strategi tidak langsung terutamanya strategi metakognitif melebihi daripada strategi langsung. Pelajar perempuan pintar berbakat adalah pengguna strategi yang lebih kerap berbanding pelajar lelaki berdasarkan jumlah markah min. Untuk gaya kognitif, pelajar *field dependent* menunjukkan jumlah skor min yang lebih tinggi dalam penggunaan strategi pembelajaran bahasa berbanding pelajar *field independent*. Selain itu, dari segi tahap penguasaan bahasa, pelajar penguasaan bahasa sederhana menggunakan strategi pembelajaran bahasa yang lebih kerap berbanding dengan pelajar penguasaan bahasa tinggi dan rendah. Data daripada temu bual melihat masalah pelajar pintar berbakat dalam pembelajaran bahasa dan bagaimana mereka mengatasi masalah mereka. Masalah utama yang dihadapi oleh pelajar ialah bercakap dalam bahasa sasaran. Mereka menggunakan strategi konvensional seperti menggunakan kamus dan melakukan latihan untuk mengatasi kelemahan bahasa mereka. Strategi pembelajaran bahasa mempunyai banyak potensi yang bermanfaat untuk pendidik, guru dan pelajar. Dapatan kajian yang diperolehi memberi gambaran tentang pembelajaran bahasa pelajar pintar berbakat PERMATAPintar yang boleh digunakan untuk membina pendekatan yang spesifik yang dapat memenuhi keperluan pelajar bagi meningkatkan potensi pelajar dalam bidang bahasa.





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ABBREVIATION LIST

Eg	exempli gratia/for example
ELS	English Language Studies
ESL	English as a Second Language
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
Et al	(et alia): and others
FD	Field Dependent
FI	Field Independent
GEFT	Group Embedded Figure Test
GPA	Grade Point Average
HOT	High Order Thinking
iBT	internet Based Test
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
JHU-CTY	Johns Hopkins University-Centre for Talented Youth
LLS	Language Learning Strategies
M	Mean
MUET	Malaysia University English Test
n	number
No./nos.	No./Number
PBL	Problem-Based Learning
PPpN	Pusat PERMATApintar Negara



PTS	Penilaian Tahap Satu
SD	Standard Deviation
SILL	Strategy Inventory Language Learning
SPSS	Statistic for Social Science Package
SQ	Strategy Questionnaire
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
TOEFL	Test of English as Foreign Language
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia





CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides explicit information on the background of study, statement of problem, the conceptual framework, purpose and objective of the study, research questions, and the significance and limitations of the study. It also gives a detailed illustration of definition of terms used in the study.



1.1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Malaysia is committed to develop an educational system for all students where equity and excellence are the main aim of the education process (Noriah, Rosadah and Siti Rahayah 2009). Equity here refers to the opportunities and support for every student to receive good education while excellence refers to the development of their learning potential to the highest level of attainment possible for each and every student. The diversity of students, considering that the progress of physical, emotional, and cognitive development of different groups of learners happen at different pace; intensified the barriers for providing appropriate instruction and environment that caters the student needs, especially with the case of gifted students.

Moreover, in the aspect of education, the needs of gifted students might be neglected unless awareness on the way they learn and think are taken into consideration. This is because education for the gifted has been identified as a very





important aspect of development to be emphasized as the gifted group have tremendous potential to be developed into very highly valuable human resource capital for the future wellbeing of a country (McLeod and Cropley 1989). Therefore, educators need to be aware of the differences among gifted students in order to provide the best and accountable ways of learning and teaching. On top of that, educators must also become aware and thus find ways to overcome the challenges in differentiating effectively for gifted students. Failing to find the appropriate ways to overcome these barriers might lead to declining level of achievement among gifted students (Sanders and Horn 1998, Stambaugh 2001).

Realizing the importance of gifted education, the PERMATApintar Education Programme was developed and carried out as a catalyst for the identification and development of gifted students in Malaysia through Pusat PERMATApintar Negara (PPpN) (Noriah, Rosadah and Siti Rahayah 2009). The identification process to identify gifted students to enrol in the special programme was done via three screening tests named 'UKM1, UKM2 and UKM3'. PERMATApintar Education Programme focuses on a holistic education and learning based on the Philosophy of Education. It also emphasizes a balanced development of physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social. However, the programme identified gifted students who have higher ability in mathematics and science domains only. It did not look at students' language ability in identification process of gifted students. Thus, the students' language skills and potential are still ambiguous, particularly in the learning of English as a second language. Elaboration on the programme is further discussed in chapter two.

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

English Language has become the second most important language in Malaysia, after Bahasa Malaysia which is the country's national language. The importance of English language as a global lingua franca has always been a major motivating factor in the learning and use of the language in Malaysia. It is vehicle to gain information in science, technology and also for academics purposes (Vinodini 2003) .



In addition, English language is also used in various profession and is a compulsory requirement in the Malaysian academic setting. Competence in English is highly placed in all fields of interest, and students are aware that getting a good grade in English greatly increases the chances of acceptance in both local or foreign universities as well as providing a coveted edge in the workplace (Vinodini 2003). However, recently, the issue of the declining standard of English among Malaysian students has become a worrisome for all (Saadiyah and Kaladevi 2009). This is evident in Malaysians' everyday speech, which are often marred by grammatical and phonological errors or at times too loaded with "suffixes" (e.g. *lah, lor, meh*) and loan words from other languages (Muniandy et al. 2010). One of the possible reasons that the majority of Malaysian ESL learners are incompetent user of English is because they do not learn the language effectively (Sahandri and Saifudin 2009).

Language learning strategies are among the main factors that help to verify competency and how our students learn a second or foreign language (Oxford 1990). In addition, understanding what students do in language learning process and how it affects language success is important in assisting students in the learning of English language. Furthermore, many factors affect the choice and suitability of strategies (Rahimi, Riazi and Saif 2008). One of the factors is individual differences especially in Malaysia's context. The diversity of learners that come from different cultural and language background affects how they learn (Chamot and Kupper 1989). This is more obvious in second language learning which is English. In accordance, many studies have been done on language learning strategies employed by different types of learners and in various contexts. However, very little studies have been done on gifted students regarding language learning (Hamidah, Aliza and Azlina 2009). Furthermore, according to Hamidah , Aliza and Azlina (2009: 146):

Gifted students have unique characteristics and have different ways of thinking and learning. Generally, they have a higher linguistic ability. This ability enables them to use language effectively in receiving, understanding and relaying information. They are fond of language games, writing and they love to speak. They are sensitive towards structures of languages, have vast



vocabularies, can spell accurately, and are able to memorise and learn various foreign languages.

These characteristics affect how they learn a language. It also influences the way they overcome problems in language learning and improve their language performance. However, the characteristics cannot be generalized to all students identified as gifted students because each student has his/her own unique patterns of development (Clark 2002). Not all gifted students have all of these characteristics all together (Aliza and Hamidah 2009).

According to Tretter (2010), certain learning strategies and skills are especially effective for enhancing gifted students' learning. This study attempted to identify language learning strategies use among gifted students enrolled in the special Programme called PERMATApintar Education Programme. These gifted students were identified through IQ tests (UKM1 and UKM2) and science and mathematics competency test (UKM3). Even though they showed higher ability in mathematics and science domains which are more on numerical aspect, their ability in language which is descriptive is remained unidentified. Based on PERMATApintar English language instructors' comments and feedback, it was revealed that the gifted students' competency in English was still lacking especially in communicative aspect. This also demonstrated in the preliminary data collected which indicates that more than half of these students falls under intermediate level with a few even exhibiting low proficiency. On top of that, all teaching and learning in this special programme are expected to be conducted in English language. However, due to the students' level of English proficiency, Malay language is used alongside with English. This indicated that the PERMATApintar gifted students may face difficulties in the use of English language. In addition, these students have special learning needs in general, which if not met, can lead to frustration, a loss of self-esteem, boredom, laziness and underachievement (Crocker 2004). Thus, it is essential to find out the language learning strategies employed by gifted students as gifted appropriate strategy coupled with rigorous intellectual demand able to provide worthwhile educational experiences for gifted students (Van Tassel- Baska 2003).





1.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework underlined this is study is second language learning and language learning strategies. Learning a second language is a complex undertaking as many variables are involved in the acquisition process (Brown 2000). In addition, according to Ellis (1994), second language acquisition involves mental process that the learners used to convert input into knowledge. Some account for how the learner make use of existing knowledge (of the mother tongue, general learning strategies, universal properties of language) to internalize knowledge of L2. Learners might face difficulties to grasp and successfully send and receive the message in a second language. Hence, learners will try to find the fastest and easiest way to do what is required in order to enhance their second language proficiency. One of the ways is by knowing and utilizing language learning strategies. In addition, language learning strategies are among the main factors that help to verify competency and how our students learn a second or foreign language (Oxford 1990). This study referred to the model of language learning strategies by Oxford (1990). The model is selected because it classified language learning strategies into six categories namely; memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Based on the classification, the rate of frequency and types of strategies use by the students are identified. Elaborations on the model are discussed in chapter 2. This study focus on language learning strategies used by PERMATApintar gifted students in learning English as a second language.



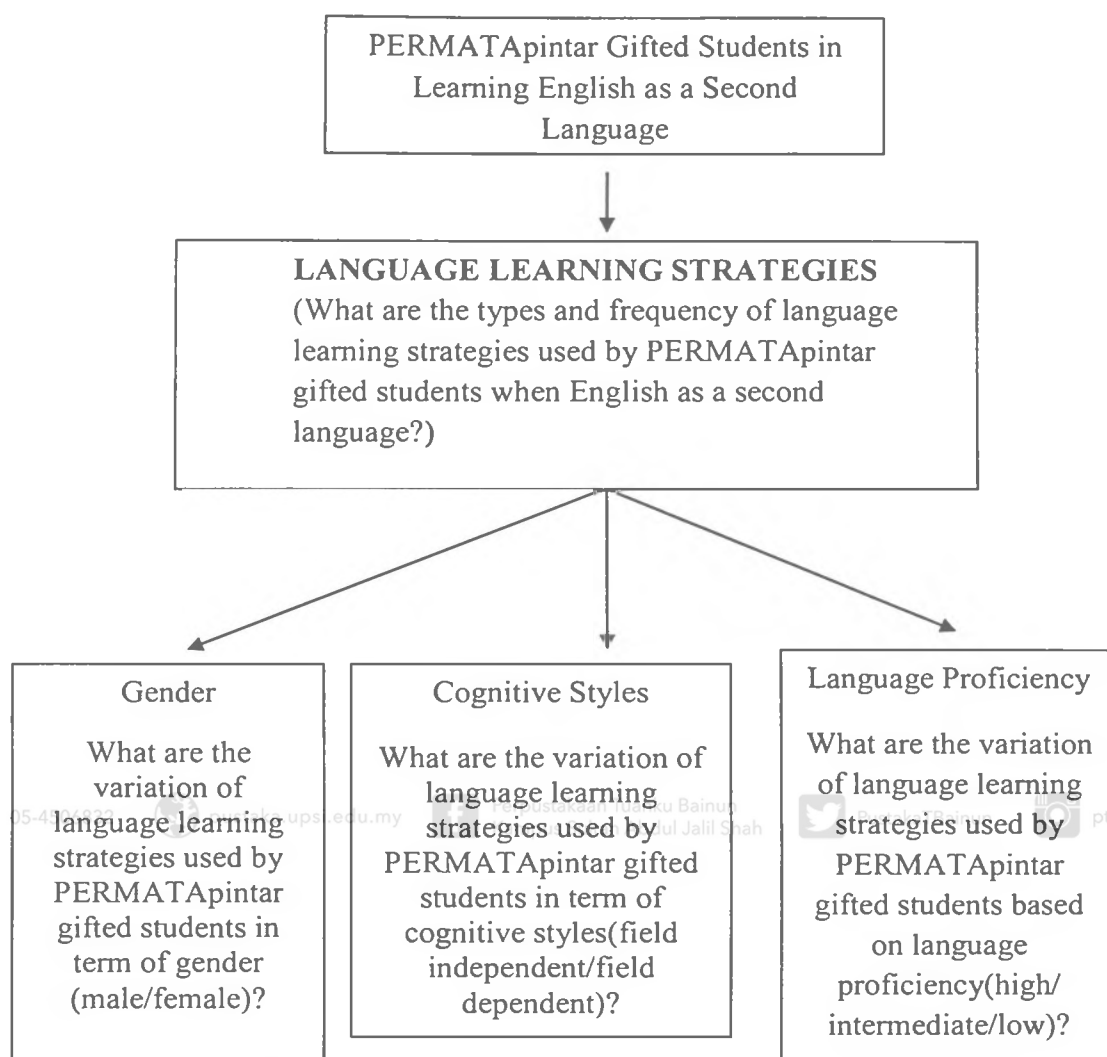


Figure 1.0 Conceptual Framework of the Study

In addition, when language learning is concerned, individual differences do play an important role. Different learners have different views as what promotes effective language learning particularly in this context of study. Based on conceptual framework as shown in figure 1.0, the individual differences in language learning are investigated based on the variation of language learning strategies employed by PERMATApintar gifted students in terms of gender, cognitive styles and language proficiency. The identification of LLS used by PERMATApintar gifted students and its variation would provide useful and refine information for the PERMATApintar



Education Programme in developing specific strategies and approaches for serving gifted students especially in the teaching and learning of target language.

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As discussed earlier, it is important to find more and refined information to define the language learning strategies use in learning English as a second language in order to develop suitable education environment and material for gifted students to reach their potential in language learning. Hence, the study aimed to investigate the language learning strategies used by gifted students in learning English as a second language. It also attempted to find out the variation of language learning strategies use in terms of gender, cognitive styles and language proficiency.

1.4.1 Objectives of The Study

The objectives of this study are as follow;

1. To investigate the types and frequency of language learning strategies used by the PERMATApintar gifted students in learning English as a second language
2. To examine the variation of strategy used by the PERMATApintar gifted students when learning English in terms of gender, cognitive styles and language proficiency
3. To gain insight on the PERMATApintar gifted students' difficulties in English language learning

1.4.2 Research Questions

The research questions of this study are as follow;

1. What are the types and frequency of language learning strategies used by the PERMATApintar gifted students when learning English?
2. What are variation of language learning strategies used by the PERMATApintar gifted students in terms of gender, cognitive styles and language proficiency?





3. What are the difficulties faced by the PERMATApintar gifted students related to English language learning?

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The research concerns students who are identified as gifted under the PERMATApintar Education Programme. The programme is an educational programme for gifted students in Malaysia. The selected students were aged 16 years old and had passed three screening tests; UKM1, UKM2 and UKM3. The second batch (form four) of gifted students enrolled in the programme was selected.

1.6 OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

1.6.1 Language Learning Strategies

According to Oxford (1992), language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that students (often consciously) use to improve their progress in developing second language skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. It also promotes learner's autonomy as learner can monitor their own progress and take into control of what strategy suits them best in any situation. Cohen (1998) stated that learners are aware of their use of language learning strategy with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and gain better understanding of the target language. In a nutshell, this study defines language learning strategies as what the learners do in language learning in order to enhance proper usage and competency of the target language.

1.6.2 PERMATApintar Gifted students

This study referred to PERMATApintar's concept of giftedness that was based on Gagné's (1995) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. This concept believes that each gifted individual is born with unique innate ability. This ability is related to genetics and in various domains. According to Gagné (1995), giftedness embodies the use of untrained and spontaneously expressed superior natural abilities (called





aptitudes or gifts) in at least one ability domain. However, PERMATApintar Education Programme only focuses on gifted ability in the cognitive domain.

1.6.3 Cognitive styles

Cognitive style is commonly related to thinking style or the way an individual thinks. It is probably an innate and habitual way of responding to information and situation (Riding and Rayner 1998). A person's cognitive style is a relatively fixed aspect of learning performance and influence a person's general attainment or achievement in learning situation. This study follows the description of cognitive styles as measured by the Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) that looked at individual's dependency on a perceptual field when analyzing a structure or form which is part of field. It categorized cognitive styles into field dependency and independency (Witkin, Oltman, Raskin and Karp 1971).

1.6.4 Language Proficiency



Language proficiency refers to the ability to comprehend the target language. Based on previous study, proficiency levels can be determined by different measures, such as standardized tests, teacher's grading and students' self-rating (Izawati 2008). PERMATApintar gifted students were selected after had gone through three screening tests; UKM1, UKM2 and UKM3. After they were identified, they were selected to enrol in the special programme. This study utilized the students' result in the mid semester examination for English subject that they took after their enrolment in the programme to measure their language proficiency. The exam used Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examination format to assess student's language skills. TOEFL evaluates the ability of an individual to understand and use English in academic setting. It is a standardized test that is used as admission requirement for non-native English speakers at many English-speaking college and universities. The higher the total score indicates a better performance and proficiency. This study uses the term 'high proficiency', 'intermediate proficiency' and 'low proficiency' to refer to students' level of proficiency based on their results.





1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Learning strategies are important in second language acquisition (Mohamed Amin 2000). By investigating the strategies used by second language learners during the language learning process, we can gain insight into the cognitive, social and affective processes involved in language learning. In addition, by attaining information related to language learning, it can help us to understand better on the mental processes possessed by gifted students as it relates to second language acquisition. Therefore, the importance of the use of LLS can be emphasized in the teaching and learning of language in order to make learning quicker and more effective.

This study acknowledged learners differences of learners in language learning. The study looked at variation of LLS used by students in terms of gender, cognitive style and language proficiency. It is important to be aware of these differences as it affects how the learners' learn especially in the case of gifted students. Gaining information on the way the gifted students learn and at the same time embracing their differences can be helpful for nurturance of their potential. Based on that acknowledgement, educators can develop specific strategies and approaches for serving gifted learners especially in teaching and learning of target language.

In addition, PERMATApintar gifted students were identified as gifted based on their ability in cognitive domain such as in Mathematics and Science subjects. This domain is focused on numerical aspect. Language on the other hand is not. The students might face difficulties to perform well in language domain. On top of that, the competence in English is crucial in all fields not only as a medium of communication but as also as a medium of instruction to gain the wealth of information and knowledge. Therefore, it is hoped that the students' difficulties in language learning identified in this study will help educators; administrators and all parties involve to provide various initiatives to address the shortcoming and support this special group of learners.

In addition, it is hoped that the findings from this study will shed light on PERMATApintar gifted students' needs in language learning to enhance their





potential in language aspect. It is important to cater and provide the best approach in education for gifted students because they have tremendous potential to be developed into highly valuable resource capital for the future wellbeing of this country.

1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that deal with the methodology and subject matters of the study. Firstly, PERMATApintar Education Programme is the pioneer education programme for gifted students in Malaysia. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all gifted students in Malaysia. The subjects have different levels of language proficiency, abilities, motivation and interest. In addition, there are other factors which could influence second language acquisition and performance such as cultural background, ethnicity, personality and task types. Other than that, only a small number of students were interviewed to find out more about LLS use among PERMATApintar gifted students. Although an interview guide was used during the session, the responses vary from one respondent to another.



1.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the background of the study, statement of the problem, the conceptual framework, purpose and objective of the study, research questions, the significance and limitations of the study. It also contained the operational definition of language learning strategy, cognitive style, gifted students, language proficiency and information on PERMATApintar Education Programme.

