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Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah



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LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MALAYSIAN CONTEXT



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NALINE A/P RAJADURAI

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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**A PROJECT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION**

**FACULTY OF LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS**

2010



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DECLARATION

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

04.04.2010


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank many people who has supported me in the course of completing this study. The completion of my research study is made possible with the help and support of many people, to whom I am very grateful.

My appreciation and thanks goes to Dr. Che Ton Mahmud, my supervisor for her thoughtful response to my work. Her encouragement and expertise is much appreciated.

Above all, thanks to my husband, Mathivanan Jaibailan for his assistance, understanding and support throughout the past several months.

A special thanks must go to the students from one of the school in Rawang, Selangor for their commitment as participants of this study.

Thanks to my father, Rajadurai Sinniah and my mother, Navammah Arumugam for their emotional support throughout the months.

Last, but not least, a note of appreciation goes to UPSI staff for their kindness and cooperation given to me during the two years of my study in UPSI.

THANK YOU

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the types of language learning strategy used by primary school pupils learning English in Malaysian context. Specifically the study aimed to find out the frequency of strategy use across gender. A questionnaire was administered to 155 primary school pupils. Data collected were analyzed. It was found that female pupils tend to use more language learning strategies than male pupils. It was found that gender did play a role in the selection of language learning strategies. In addition, the most and least favoured strategies were identified.

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini ialah untuk menyelidik strategi pembelajaran yang digunakan oleh murid-murid sekolah rendah untuk mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia. Tujuan kajian ini juga adalah untuk melihat setakat mana pencapaian mengikut jantina. Kajian ini dijalankan menggunakan soal selidik. Soal selidik ini diberikan kepada 155 orang murid sekolah rendah untuk dijawab. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan jantina ada memainkan peranan dalam pemilihan strategi pembelajaran menguasai Bahasa Inggeris. Dengan adanya kekerapan dan peratus, dapat dikenalpasti strategi pembelajaran yang paling kerap dan kurang digunakan.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study



Language learning strategy should be an integral part in the learning of language and it is best developed through meaningful use in trusting environment where students' cultural backgrounds and styles are taken into account. Teachers, as the role models should play an important part in ensuring that language learning occupy a central position in the classroom. This is because, if language learning strategy is given the attention that it deserves, it can change the atmosphere of a classroom for language learners.

Therefore, teachers as motivators should take the challenge in creating the type of environment that will promote effective communication among students. Moreover, they also need to utilize various strategies and methods in their teaching



practice to accommodate the learners' needs and interest. Language learning strategy is one of the powerful methods that can be utilized by the teachers to captivate their students' attention towards the language learning process and to improve their language.

This is because, educators have long known that the arts of language can contribute to student academic success and emotional well-being. The ancient art of language learning strategy is especially well suited for students' exploration.

As Wenden (1985) reminds us, there is an old proverb which states: "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime".

Applied to the language teaching and learning field, this proverb might be interpreted to mean that if students are provided with answers, the immediate problem is solved. But if they are taught the strategies to work out the answers for themselves, they are empowered to manage their own learning.

Since the pioneering work carried out in the mid-seventies (for instance by Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) there has been an awareness that language learning strategies have the potential to be "an extremely powerful learning tool" (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, 1985, p.43). In spite of this awareness, and in spite of much useful and interesting work having been carried out in the intervening years

(nearly a quarter of a century), the language learning strategy field continues to be characterized by “confusion” and “no consensus” (O’Malley et al, 1985, p.22).

1.2 Purpose of study

Reluctance to read is a notable factor in the Malaysian ESL classroom today Husin (1991). Research shows that there is a steady decline in the use of English language to communicate in the classroom due to lack of language learning strategy. Pupils in Malaysia feel more at ease in communicating in their mother tongue or Bahasa Malaysia even in the English language classroom Husin (1991).

Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to find out the language learning strategy used by pupils in language learning. This study also attempts to find out the need to use proper language learning strategies to enhance learning among primary pupils in Malaysian ESL classroom. In the aspect, the researcher will discuss the reasons of using language learning strategies to enrich students’ learning the language. This study can also help educators to understand the relevant theories underlying the use of language learning strategy to improve students’ language. The major purpose of this research is to make language learning strategies understandable to teachers of second and foreign languages, so that they can enable students to become better learners. This research finding is hoped to encourage more



English teachers in schools to provide opportunities for application of different language learning strategies. It takes better teachers to focus on the learner Peter Strevens, (1982) as cited in Griffith (2003).

Learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self confidence.



Although researchers have formally discovered and named language learning strategies recently, such strategies have actually been used for thousands of years.

One well-known example is the mnemonic or memory devices used in ancient times to help storytellers remember their lines. Throughout history, the best language students have used strategies, ranging from naturalistic language practice techniques to analytic, rule based strategies.

Now for the first time language learning strategies are becoming widely recognized throughout education in general. Under various names, such as learning skills, learning strategies are the way students learn a wide range of subjects, from native language reading through electronics troubleshooting to new languages. Within the language instruction field, teachers are starting to discuss learning





strategies among themselves. Learning strategy workshops are drawing big crowds at language teachers' conventions. Researchers are identifying, classifying and evaluating language learning strategies, and these efforts are resulting in a steady stream of articles on the topic. Most encouraging of all, increasing numbers of language learners are beginning to recognize the power of their own strategies.

There are at least three main purposes for the need of primary school students to learn English in Malaysia. Firstly, English is learnt as a subject like any other subjects. This kind of learning is very formal and takes place mainly in the classroom. On average, primary school students study it for one period consisting of 30 minutes.

There are 7 periods for English in a week which amounts to about 210 minutes of



English language learning in the classroom. Outside the language classroom, especially in rural areas, there is hardly any demand for and exposure to English. Hence, in this kind of setting, English is learnt and used more as a foreign language than a second language. On the contrary, the demand for and exposure to English is quite high in the urban areas both in and out of the classroom. In this latter setting, English is learnt and used more as a second language rather than as a foreign language.

Secondly, most students learn English to get good grades in the public examinations or at least to get a pass in it. Although this involves mainly formal learning, the learning takes place normally in preparation for the exams and not in



everyday classroom language learning. Nevertheless, it can be predicted that there will be some similarities between the way students learn English in the classroom and the way they learn it to prepare for their English examinations. In short, there is the need to find out more about what can be termed as ‘exam language learning strategies’.

Finally, English is learnt and used by some school students to communicate and interact. The majority of learners in this kind of setting come from upper or middle as a second language class urban population. The learning and use of English in these cases can be regarded as a second language after Bahasa Malaysia. In this kind of setting, the largest portion of the learning process is often informal and takes place out of the classroom. Hence, there is a need to find out about how pupils learn English within the classroom and out of the classroom.

The major purpose of this research is to make language learning strategies understandable to teachers of second and foreign languages, so they can enable pupils to become better learners.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study is significant in its ways. First, it will provide evidence from previous research on factors hindering language learning strategy. Second, it will provide



teachers with clearer information on the effectiveness of using language learning strategies. Third or lastly, the syllabus designers may incorporate the strategy into the classroom, which could assist teachers to improvise their teaching in order to enhance language learning on the whole. It is hoped that the variety of teaching strategy will enhance students' interest which will lead to better understanding. By undertaking this study, the researcher will be able to give feedback about the result of the study and also share the methodology on how to improve on teaching more effectively.

1.4 Statement of the Problem



The context of the English Language setting in Malaysia can be considered to be a unique one. To understand the present status and setting of the learning and teaching of English in Malaysia, it is inevitable to look briefly at the country's historical background, especially in terms of how it has influenced the language education policies in Malaysia from the past to present.

Malaysia is a multi-cultural country with a population of about 26 million people. It consists of three major ethnic groups; namely, Malay, Chinese and Indian. Prior to the nineteenth century, Malaysia was fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnic structure.





Malaysia has a long history of English as a medium of instruction in the education system. Since the time Malaysia was colonized by the British, the English language enjoyed high status in education. Two kinds of English medium schools were established in Malaysia during the colonial days; mission schools and free schools. However, since these schools were established in towns, they were attended mainly by the Chinese and Indian pupils. Hence, children in rural areas, who were mainly Malays remained monolingual. Although the British had established Malay medium schools for the Malays, English was not included in the curriculum. This meant that children in the urban areas had not only the opportunities to attend English medium schools, but had been given top posts in the civil service. In other words, even though the Malays constituted the largest proportion of the population, they were deprived of the advantages of English medium education and henceforth the career opportunities associated with it (Husin 1981).

Although the use of English as a means of communication continued after its independence in 1957, Malaysia placed strong emphasis on the acquisition of Bahasa Malaysia. In fact, before independence, the Razak Report (Government of Malaysia 1956) promoted Bahasa Malaysia to the status of national language as a means of creating national unity. Hence, with the implementation of the Education Act in 1961, Bahasa Malaysia was introduced as the principal medium of instruction in primary schools. In 1967, Bahasa Malaysia became official language of Malaysia as well as a main medium of instruction in secondary schools. Although English was retained





as a compulsory school subject, it was not necessary for school students to get a pass in English to be awarded a school certificate.

Consequently, the shift in the status of the English language in the school system not only marked the decline of English in Malaysia, but also brought about a predominantly monolingual rural population and a mainly bilingual urban population (Gaudart 1987). Malay children in the rural areas felt that they could continue to be monolingual. The Chinese and Indians encouraged their children to learn languages related to their own cultures (Mandarin or Tamil) as well as learning Bahasa Malaysia. At the same time, parents who had attended English medium schools passed the language on to their children at home. Consequently, in upper and middle class urban populations the standard of English remained high. Many of these parents realized that being bilingual or even trilingual meant better job opportunities.

Recently, there is grave concern among politicians, academicians and parents with regards to the declining standard of English proficiency among students at all levels of education (Dean 1991). Although the importance of Bahasa Malaysia is acknowledged and remains unchanged, people have realized that in reality English is still important for the educational, career and economic developments of the country. This is quite apparent in a number of recent developments in the education sector.





The government (Jones 1994) indicated the likelihood of reinstating English as the medium of instruction for technical subjects such as engineering, medicine and computer science in higher education institutions. In the private and business sectors, most employers expect graduates to be proficient in English. As such, those who are bilingual in Bahasa Malaysia and English often see better career opportunities than their monolingual counterparts.

Last but not least, the importance of English was signaled recently in the newly launched programme for Malaysia's future development known as Wawasan 2020 or Vision 2020 (Malaysia 1991). Although Bahasa Malaysia is given a high status in education, it is recognized that English is important for economic development and thus, special provisions have to be made for it. In a conference entitled 'The Role Of English as a Language of Knowledge and as a Resource for National Development', Wan Mohd. Zahid (1992) stated that Malaysian need a very high level of competence in English and that proficiency in the language is important to take advantage of new career opportunities as the country experiences rapid development'.

In short, the importance of the English Language in Malaysia at present and in future cannot be denied. In fact, at the moment, there is public concern that the standard of English in the country should be raised to a much higher level. In this regard, studies designed to investigate language learning strategies employed by





school students learning English in the Malaysian context can play an important part in the above mentioned developments. The understanding of what these learners do in the language learning process and how these in turn affect language success is paramount in our effort to assist these learners in the present context of learning the English language.

As a result of the historical and educational developments described earlier, the present day setting for English language learning and use in Malaysia can be regarded as a 'mixed one' Although English is supposed to be taught in schools as a second language, students can easily survive without using it for daily means of communication. Nevertheless, because it is taught as a subject, English is learnt formally in the classroom. In addition, although a pass grade in English has ceased to be a requirement in any of the public examinations, students who realize its potential in higher educational and career development strive hard to do well in the English language paper.

Learners in the ESL classroom seem to develop a kind of anxiety towards the English Language. The language anxiety further influences their learning whereby it affects the development of language skills. They are unable to read due to various affective factors such as anxiety, low motivation, low risk-taking attitude and shyness which has led them in not acquiring the language. Therefore, it is the teachers role to find ways to motivate them in order to enrich their language learning through various





strategies. The use of different language learning strategies will help to address this problem. Learning strategies is important for a students' development in language learning.

Unfortunately, the use of English as a communication tool among primary school students in ESL Malaysian classroom has deteriorated along the years. According to Dr. Zaidan and Ali Jassem (1993), English Language has deteriorated after Malaysia gained its independence from Britain in 1957. The seriousness of the deterioration can be seen especially in the 70s and early 80s when the English medium schools were changed into Malay medium ones. Malaysian people generally paid less attention to English language and were more concerned in mastering Bahasa Malaysia.



Students' achievement and development in the language learning process depend solely on the teachers' attitude and sincerity in the teaching. This creativity in utilizing various strategies and methods in teaching will determine the success of their lessons in the classroom. Therefore, the main focus of this research is to find out the effectiveness of using language learning strategies to improve the students learning the language in the Malaysian ESL classroom.



1.5 Research Questions

- a) What are the range and types of language learning strategies used by primary school pupils, learning English in the Malaysian context?
- b) Which language learning strategies are most common and least common among the pupils in the study?
- c) Does the female pupils use language learning strategy more often than the male pupils?

1.6 Definition of terms

The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek term *strategia* meaning generalship or the art of war. More specifically, strategy involves the optimal managements of troops, ships or aircraft in a planned campaign. A different but related word is tactics, which are tools to achieve the success of strategies. Many people use these two terms interchangeably. The two expressions share some basic implied characteristics: planning, competition, conscious manipulation and movement toward a goal. In nonmilitary settings, the strategy concept has been applied to clearly non adversarial situations, where it has come to mean a plan , step or conscious action toward achievement of an objective

The strategy concept, without its aggressive and competitive trappings, has become influential in education, where it has taken on a new meaning and has been transformed into learning strategies. One commonly used technical definition says that learning strategies are operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information. This definition, while helpful, does not fully convey the excitement or richness of learning strategies. It is useful to expand this definition by saying that learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make new learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed, more effective and more transferable to new situation.

According to Peter Strevens, as cited in Griffith (2003) learning is conscious knowledge language rules, does not typically lead to conversational fluency, and is derived from formal instruction. Acquisition on the other hand, occurs unconsciously and spontaneously, does lead to conversational fluency and arises from naturalistic language use. Learning cannot contribute to acquisition, i.e., that “conscious” gains in knowledge cannot influence “subconscious” development of language.

The work done by researchers such as Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) in the mid seventies, reveals that awareness has been slowly growing of the importance of the strategies used by learners in the language learning process, since ultimately, like the proverbial horse led to water but which must do the drinking itself, even with the



best teachers and methods, students are the only ones who can actually do the learning. As Nyikos and Oxford (1993, p.11) put it: “learning begins with the learner”.

O’Malley (1985. p22) put language learning strategy this way:

There is no consensus on what constitutes a learning strategy in second language learning or how these differ from other types of learner activities. Learning, teaching and communication strategies are often interlaced in discussions of language learning and are often applied to the same behaviour. Further, even within the group of activities most often referred to as learning strategies, there is considerable confusion about definitions of specific strategies and about the hierarchic relationship among strategies.



One of the earliest researchers in this field, Rubin (1975, p.43) provided a very broad definition of learning strategies as “the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge

Oxford (1990) took this process a step further. Like O’Malley et al (1985), she used Rigney’s definition of language learning strategies as “operations employed by



the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information” (Oxford, 1990, p.8) as a base. Attempting to redress the perceived problem that many strategy inventories appeared to emphasize cognitive and metacognitive strategies and to ascribe much less importance to affective and social strategies, she classified learning strategies into six groups: memory strategies (which relate to how students remember language), cognitive strategies (which relate to how students think about their learning), compensation strategies (which enable students to make up for limited knowledge), meta cognitive strategies (relating to how students manage their own learning), affective strategies (relating to students’ feelings) and social strategies (which involve learning by interaction with others).

1.7 Limitation of the Study

This study was limited to four classes comprising one hundred and fifty five students from one school. The result of this study will apply only to the students who are directly involved in the study. Therefore, it could not represent the whole population.

The researcher had only carried out the study on advance and average pupils only. Therefore, it could not represent the weak pupils. The researcher had only distributed the questionnaire to advance and average pupils because the weak ones could not read and even some would not want to answer the questionnaire.



The time constraint do not allow the researcher to carry out a more thorough study on the topic. Furthermore, the approach being studied demands a carefully planned and timely process.

Furthermore, the researcher feels that more time allocation should be given to complete this project work. This is because, even though this project work is merely based on research only, there are still a lot of time spend to do the research from various sources and this takes up a lot of time and effort on the researcher's part.

