

## **GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND THEIR STRATEGIES: AN INSIGHT**

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**ABSTRACT:** The Malaysian Education Blueprint is aimed to ensure every child is proficient in English Language besides Bahasa Malaysia. Thus the English Language syllabus is geared to mould learners to become successful language learners. However, not all learners are capable of being successful language learners despite years of schooling. Therefore, this study aims to investigate language learning strategies used by good language learners in learning English as their second language. To achieve the aim of the study, a questionnaire was used to collect the quantitative data. 30 pupils with good language ability from a rural primary school in Sabah were selected to participate in this study. The findings of the study indicated that different language learners prefer different learning strategies to improve their second language learning. The learning strategies also vary based on the language skills they are learning. The findings of the study are hoped to provide significant impact to the pupils, teachers and curriculum planners to integrate language learning strategies in teaching and learning to assist successful language learning.

**KEYWORDS:** good language learners, language learning strategies, rural school

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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

English language plays a pivotal role in many parts of the world including Malaysia. In Malaysia, English Language is a compulsory subject to be taught for both primary and secondary school learners. Although the Ministry Of Education has implemented and carried out numerous programmes to enhance the understanding and learning of English, the results were not to the expected level. One of the evidence is through the results of English Language in Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR), which showed decline (Malay Mail Online, 2015).

One of the most important factors which influence the acquisition of English language among primary school learners is Language Learning Strategies (LLS). LLS are the strategies used by learners to improve their language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing grammar and vocabulary. These strategies might be different from one learner to another learner despite being in the same class and being taught by the same teacher. Although language learning strategies differ from one individual to another, it can be identified and exposed to various range of learners in order to help them to become successful language learners too.

### **1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The English Language syllabus in Malaysian schools is aimed to mould learners to become successful language learners. However, not all learners are capable of being successful language learners after their schooling years.

According to Kashefien-Naeeni and Maarof (2010), teachers are not completely aware of the language learning strategies used by the learners. When this situation occurs, teachers will try to force the learners to absorb the knowledge in a way which is least preferred or not preferred by them. If this situation takes place

often, the learners will not have the confidence to learn the language and eventually distracts them from being good language learners.

Next, the learners are also facing problem in becoming good language learners due to inadequate information about language learning strategies. Learners might not be exposed to various language learning strategies which makes them to use strategy that does not suit them well. On the other hand, teachers also tend to choose and assign strategies to the learners without considering their ability.

In addition, learners also face difficulties in mastering and using LLS due to the indirect methods used by the teacher. When the teachers are exposing the learners with LLS implicitly, the learners could not identify the strategies that are embedded in the activities. This is parallel to Mat and Yunus (2014), who identified that, if the learners do not understand what they are doing at the moment, they would face difficulties to improve on the process that they are being involved.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of the study is to investigate language learning strategies used by good language learners in rural primary school to enhance their English Language proficiency.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

What are the language learning strategies used by good language learners in rural primary school to improve their English Language proficiency?

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Language learning strategies plays important roles in learning a language. Since 1970's, the research on language learning strategies has gained attention of many researchers. According to Chien (2010), many researchers tend to research how learners process new information and the types of language learning strategies that they use to understand, learn or remember the information while learning a second or foreign language.

Language learning strategies has been defined in various ways by various advocates of language learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are defined as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.

On the other hand, Embi (2000) had stated that language learning strategies are the actions taken by the learners themselves to improve the process of language learning. He also added that language learning strategies are used by the learners to facilitate different language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

According to Lessard-Clouston 1997, language learning strategies can be characterised by several criteria. Firstly, language learning strategies are learner generated which means that the learners themselves take the steps or actions to learn the language. Secondly, language learning strategies improve language learning of the learners. Through this criterion, learners develop language competence and increase their understanding of the language. Next, language learning strategies can be visible as well as invisible. This includes learners' behaviour, steps, techniques, thoughts and mental processes involved in learning the language. Finally, language learning strategies involve information and memory. The targets of language learning strategies are to gain knowledge and remember the information.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), language learning strategies were divided into three categories which are meta-cognitive, cognitive and social affective. These three categories represent planning of the learning, thinking about the learning process, monitoring their own comprehension or production and finally

evaluating the outcome of their own learning. Meanwhile, Oxford (1990) had categorised language learning strategies into two major aspects which are direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are further divided into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies while indirect strategies are divided into meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies. According to Oxford (1990), direct strategies involve the target language and require the mental processing of the language. On the other hand, indirect strategies are strategies that support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language.

In addition to the language learning strategies used by the learners, researchers also tend to focus on defining the 'Good Language Learners'. According to Zare (2012), research findings have identified that certain learners seemed to be good language learners regardless of the teaching methods or techniques used by the teachers while the rest does not have the ability to be successful. Thus researches had described goodlanguage learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles and strategies.

According to Rubin and Thompson (1994), there are a few characteristics that are possessed by goodlanguage learners. Some of the main characteristics of good language learners are; good language learners find their own opportunity to use the language and be responsible for their own learning. Next, they are also creative and experiment with grammar and words. Good language learners are also willing to take risks and also make errors work for them and not against them. They will use the errors that they have made earlier as a guidance to improvise their current learning. On the other hand, good language learners also use their linguistic knowledge including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language. Another important characteristic of good language learners is being independent. They do not rely solely to the teacher or others in order to learn a language. They will make use of their time wisely and use independent actions to enhance their learning such as extensive reading.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study was aimed to identify strategies used by good language learners to improve various language skills. Thus a survey was carried out to identify those strategies. This study was administered through a questionnaire which was given to the selected good language learners.

#### **3.2 Sample**

The sample of this study is 30 primary level 2 pupils from Sekolah Kebangsaan Ladang Tomanggong. This is a rural school located in the district of Kinabatangan, Sabah. The sample consists of 10 males and 20 females from Bugis and Sungai ethnics. Thesample is chosen based on their achievements in English Language examinations. The sample obtained good grades in examinations and resembles good language learners in Sekolah Kebangsaan Ladang Tomanggong.

#### **3.3 Instrument**

This study was conducted by administering a questionnaire to the selected good language learners. The questionnaire was adapted from the inventory developed by Cohen, Oxford and Chi (2005). The questionnaire was divided into four parts namely Part A, Part B, Part C and Part D. Each part consist of ten items related to various language learning skills such as listening and speaking, reading, writing and grammar and vocabulary.

#### **3.4 Pilot Test**

Before administering the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with eight learners with the same attributes with the actual respondents. The pilot test was carried out in order to avoid disputes, ambiguity and misinterpretation during the data collection process. Apart from that, a few learners from the pilot test group also have been randomly chosen to discuss on the aspects of the instruments such as the layout, design,

language used as well as the clarity of the instructions. Based on the output from the pilot test, the questionnaire was refined to ensure that the statements are understandable, appropriate with the proficiency of the learners and valid with the study that is being conducted.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

The findings from the study were analysed using percentage count and presented in the form of a table. The table shows the percentage of respondents who agreed, agreed to some extent and disagreed to the statements in the questionnaire regarding language learning strategies that they use. The findings from the table were later explained and discussed in reference to language learning strategies and characteristics of good language learners.

### 4.0 Findings

**Table 1: Most Preferred Language Learning Strategies According to the Skills**

No	Skills	Preferred Strategy (Item)	Percentage	Strategy
1	Listening	I ask people to repeat unfamiliar sounds	86.7 %	Social
2	Speaking	I ask people to correct me when I talk	83.3 %	Social
3	Reading	I read things more than once	83.3 %	Memory
4	Writing	I use a dictionary	90.0 %	Cognitive
5	Grammar	I refer to grammar notes when there is a doubt	93.3 %	Cognitive
6	Vocabulary	I use rhyming to remember new words	80.0 %	Affective

From the table above, it can be seen that 86.7% of the respondents agreed that they ask people to repeat unfamiliar sounds in English (*Item 4*). Another 13.3 % of the respondents also stated that they agree to this strategy to some extent and none of the respondents disagreed to this strategy. For the speaking strategies, the data collected shows that the respondents are keen in asking people to correct them when they are speaking (*Item 7*). 83.3% of the respondents agreed and another 16.7% of the respondents agreed to some extent to this strategy.

In addition, for the reading skills the table above shows that 83.3% of the respondents agreed that they read things more than once (*Item 13*) followed by another 16.7% of the respondents who agreed to some extent that they too read thing more than once. Besides that, the table above shows that 90.0% of the respondents agreed that they use dictionary while writing (*Item 24*). Another 10.0% of the respondents agreed to some extent to this strategy and none of the respondents disagreed to the use of this strategy.

From the table above, it can be concluded that most of the respondents agreed that they referred to grammar notes when they have doubts (*Item 34*). The table shows that 93.3% of the respondents agreed and 6.7% agreed to some extent that they referred to grammar notes. Finally, the findings show that 80.0% of the respondents agreed that they use rhyming to remember new words (*Item 38*). The rest of the respondents agreed to some extent to this strategy which contributes 20.0% of the respondents.

### 5.0 DISCUSSION

Based on the study conducted, it has been identified that learners use various language learning strategies in order to become a good language learner. Although different learners preferred different language learning strategies, there are some strategies that are prominent among good language learners.

Firstly, good language learners tend to ask people to repeat unfamiliar sounds and words in order to enhance their listening skills. This indicates that the learners are taking the initiative to improve their listening skills and be responsible for their own learning. This is parallel to Rubin and Thompson (1994), that good language learners are responsible for their own learning. This strategy also can be linked to one of Oxford (1990) indirect strategies of language learning which is social strategy. By applying this strategy, the learners are

actually cooperating with other in order to listen to the unfamiliar sounds repetitively and enhance their listening skills.

For the speaking skills, the findings shows that most of the good language learners prefer to ask people to correct them when they talk. The correction which is done almost immediately is very useful for the learners themselves as the errors are still fresh in their minds and the correction can be easily absorbed. According to Rubin and Thompson (1994), good language learners are also willing to take risks and make errors work for them and not against them. This strategy of asking people to correct themselves resembles indirect, social strategies developed by Oxford (1990). According to Oxford, one of the strategies used under the social strategies is cooperating with others. This strategy is clearly seen among the good language learners in this study where they cooperate with others to correct the errors they made while speaking.

On the other hand, the good language learners had identified that they read things more than once. This strategy is linked to reviewing well strategy under the classification of memory strategy by Oxford (1990). When learners read the text more than once, they actually review the content to enhance their reading and comprehend the text well.

Next, the use of dictionary while writing is the most preferred strategy among the good language learners from this study. Good language learners tend to be independent in identifying the meaning of words while writing. This eventually enhances their writing skill as well as their English Language proficiency. This is supported by another characteristic of good language learners discussed by Rubin and Thompson (1994). According to them, good language learners are independent learners who do not rely solely to the teacher or others in order to learn a language. The strategy of using dictionary resembles the receiving and sending messages strategy under the cognitive strategies by Oxford (1990) where the learners use resources to find out the meaning of words. This is another direct strategy preferred by the good language learners from this study.

From the study, it has been identified that most good language learners tend to refer to grammar notes when they encounter any doubts in learning grammar. This is a very effective strategy as the learners rarely make errors if they refer to the grammar notes. This strategy can be linked to reviewing well strategy under the memory strategies proposed by Oxford (1990). This is because, when the learners are referring to the grammar notes, they are actually reviewing and retrieving the information that they have stored earlier to aid the current situation.

Finally for vocabulary, good language learners in this study preferred to use rhyming to remember new words that they encountered. Incorporating rhyming involves creative and fun aspects to the learning process. This strategy resembles one of the indirect strategies proposed by Oxford (1990) which is lowering anxiety. The good language learners reduced their anxiety by using fun elements such as rhyming to remember new vocabularies that they have encountered. As a whole, the study identified that the learners preferred social as well as cognitive strategies more compared to memory and affective strategies.

## **5.1 IMPLICATIONS TO TEACHING AND LEARNING**

From the findings of the study, it has been identified that there are various strategies preferred and used by the good language learners. Thus, teachers play a pivotal role in identifying those language learning strategies of good language learners and exposing it to various ranges of learners.

For the listening skills, successful language learners tend to ask people to repeat unfamiliar sounds and words to enhance their listening skill. In order to apply this strategy in the classroom, teachers should first know the proficiency level of their pupils. Then the teachers should use more repetition in order for the learners to acquire the new sound or word. After the learners are being exposed to a good amount of repetition, the teacher should encourage them to remember the sounds and words.

Next, good language learners prefer to ask people to correct them when they talk in order to enhance their speaking skills. In order to expose this strategy, the teachers should be very attentive when the learners are talking and correct their errors right after the learner had stopped talking. Correcting almost each word in a sentence as well as interrupting while the learners are talking could increase learners' anxiety level. Therefore the teachers should avoid interrupting and correcting all the errors. Besides that, teachers also should provide opportunity for the learners to use the corrected versions. Teachers can ask the learners to repeat corrected sentences or provide a different context such as a conversation between two pupils in order for the learners to speak correctly.

On the other hand, good language learners had identified that they read things more than once. Reading a text more than once is very helpful for the learners to improve their reading skills as well as their proficiency because they could comprehend and understand the text better. Therefore, teachers should encourage learners to read a text more than once. Teachers should use interesting and attractive materials as a means of encouraging the learners to read more than once. On the other hand, teachers should use both linear and non-linear texts in order to avoid boredom among the learners while they are reading the text more than once.

Next, the use of dictionary while writing is the best strategy for writing skill which needs to be exposed to all range of learners. Before encouraging the use of dictionaries, teachers should expose and equip the learners with dictionary skills. The learners need to be taught the correct way of using a dictionary and how the meaning is retrieved from it.

As for the grammar skills, most good language learners tend to refer to grammar notes when they encounter doubts. In order to introduce and expose this strategy to the learners, teachers should introduce pocket notes to them. The pocket notes also need to be supplied with enough examples to boost learners' understanding. For moderate and advanced learners, teachers can guide them to prepare their own pocket notes based on the notes given by the teachers. Teachers then need to check the notes and make sure the notes prepared by the learners are error free in order to avoid misconception. Apart from that, teachers should always encourage learners to revisit the notes and conduct simple quizzes to ensure that the pupils have obtained the grammar knowledge successfully.

Finally, for the vocabulary skills, teachers should expose learners to the strategy of using rhyming to remember new vocabularies. Teachers should provide various examples on how to use rhyming to remember new vocabularies. Then, teachers should encourage the learners to create their own rhyming vocabularies and share it with their friends. This enhances learners' confidence to become good language learners. Low achievers should be encouraged to use this strategy with lesser words and gradually increase to more words.

## **5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the study, it is recommended that teachers should equip themselves with the knowledge of various language learning strategies. According to Nazri, Yunus and Nazri (2016), language instructors should employ the contexts of learning strategies to help learners to utilize various strategies as well as discover new strategies that suits them. In order to equip themselves with the knowledge of language learning strategies, teachers should be involved in workshops or projects that involve language learning strategies. Thus, the District Education Office should play the role of identifying schools with poor language achievements and provide workshops or modules for the teachers who will then implement the knowledge of language learning strategies in their respective schools.

Next, the teachers are recommended to teach the language learning strategies using direct methods. This is to ensure that the learners acquire and use the strategies without any confusion or ambiguity. On the other hand, teachers are also recommended to carry out short term and long term programmes with the learners. Short term programmes involves learning and applying a specific strategy meanwhile long term programmes involves learning and applying a few language learning strategies. The strengths and weaknesses of each programme that have been carried need to be identified and improved to enhance its effectiveness among the learners in the future.

Finally, teachers should play the role of facilitators while exposing and teaching language learning strategies among the learners. Teachers should avoid being the autonomy in deciding the language learning strategies on behalf of their learners. Learners should be given the ultimate freedom to choose and use the strategies that works well for them to improve all the skills involved in learning English Language.

### 5.3 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, different learners use different language learning strategies to improve their language skills as well as their proficiency level. From the study, the learners preferred social and cognitive strategies compared to other strategies. According to Yunus, Sulaiman and Embi (2013), learning strategies are vital in second language acquisition and investigation on the learning strategies used by the learners provides an insight to the processes involved in language learning such as cognitive, social and affective processes.

Although language learning strategies vary from an individual to another, teachers should not limit the learners' exposure to various strategies. Teacher should expose various strategies to the learners despite their proficiency level. Learners also should be given opportunity to choose and apply language learning strategies which suits them the best. Exposing low achievers to the language learning strategies preferred by good language learners minimizes the time needed for them to choose the best strategy and become good language learners and eventually reduces the proficiency gap between the learners.

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