Language Learning Strategies Used by English Second Language (ESL) Learners in Rural Primary Schools in Tenom District

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ABSTRACT: Teaching of English as a second language is still a teaching dilemma for English language teachers in Malaysia. According to Feng (2023), students only learn English in the classroom and due to the lack of supervision by teachers, the knowledge they gained in the classroom was easily forgotten. One of the reasons is because the teaching techinques and methods that applied by the teachers do not support the student language learning. This is supported by a study done by Mupa and Chinooneka (2015) that found teachers do not prepare various methods had contributed to ineffective teaching and learning in schools. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify language learning strategies (LLS) used among Year 6 students from rural area primary schools located in Tenom, Sabah. The respondents were purposely selected to respond to the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The data were collected and analysed descriptively. After completion of the study, the most frequently used LLS by the Year 6 students were investigated. Besides, the least frequently used LLS were also examined. Data collected revealed that the majority of respondents preferred to use memory and compensation strategy to enhance their language learning. The study also revealed that the least preferred LLS by the respondents were metacognitive strategy and affective stategy. The findings and implications of this study may benefit ESL teachers and educators in rural areas to increase the effectiveness of their own language teachings and pedagogies.

KEYWORDS: English as a second language (ESL), ESL Learners, Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Rural Area Primary Schools, Year 6 students.

INTRODUCTION

English is a language that is used worldwide and plays an important role in equipping the students with necessary skills. However, low proficiency students have been a major problem in Malaysian education. The students' failure to grasp the English language after eleven years of primary and secondary education is still a hot topic for scholars (Nor Hahsimah et al., 2008). Students often view English as a subject that is too difficult and boring, causing them to give up trying any task that is given by the teachers. This can be seen especially in rural schools. Wahi (2015 as cited in Rahim and Wahi, 2023) stated that the students are lacking in exposure and less opportunity to use English as their surroundings will only communicate using their first language.

One of the ways to improve this is by recognizing the learning strategies practiced by the students so that the teachers can help to escalate English language acquisition. Language teachers can facilitate learners by teaching them effective learning strategies, to let the students learn independently (Ghafournia, 2023). This is supported by Rubin (1975 as cited in Iman & Enas 2023) that claimed students need to understand the learning strategies that best suit them in order to become successful language learners. Thus, this study aims to find successful learning strategies that are preferred by English language students from three schools located in rural area in Tenom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategies for learning were "any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information" (Wenden & Rubin, 1987). This was aligned with what had been illustrated by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), in which they argued that strategies of learning were "Individuals' special thoughts or behaviours help them understand, learn or retain information".

According to Brown (2007) strategies for learning are particular approaches developed by learners to solve problems through input and output of second language. These strategies of language learning have been identified by the researchers. Subsequently, many language learning experts have classified those strategies. This progress had helped to classify these strategies and their connection to multitude of language learning cognitive processing stages as well as assist in constructing instructional framework. Hence,

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studying the language learning strategies classification will therefore benefit teachers and learners in comprehending the strategies as well as a range of strategic techniques used.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research was chosen from Oxford (1990) Classification of Language Learning Strategies, which classified language learning strategies into two categories. As classified by Oxford, there are two primary language learning strategy categories which are direct and indirect. These strategies further divided into six classes.

Direct strategies are particular methods of using language. They were subdivided into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies (Lee, 2010). Memory strategy involves mental processes to keep and retrieve new information in the memory when necessary while cognitive strategies involve conscious ways of dealing with the target language and fall into four sets which include I) practicing, II) receiving and sending messages, III) analysing and reasoning and IV) creating structure for input and output (Zare, 2012). Learners use compensation strategies when faced with a temporary speech or writing breakdown (Oxford, 1990).

Besides that, indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies enable the learners to coordinate their own learning process by centring the learning, arranging and planning learning and evaluating own learning (Lee, 2010). Affective strategies are used to lower the learners' anxieties and took their emotional temperature (Lee et al., 2016). For studying with others, social strategies are used and split into three sets that ask questions, cooperate and emphasize with others.

Research on Good Language Learners

Learners learn their second language differently. Early research had been carried out on the features of good learners of languages and the different strategies used by the learners. Lightbown and Prada (1999) proposed several characteristics of personality to likely affect the second language learners while Genesee (1976) discussed the role of second language learning intelligence.

Other than that, past studies were also done on what successful language students are doing. Different learners used different strategies to solve problems, such as complicated tasks. We can achieve a clearer idea of cognitive, social and affective strategies by exploring what tactics second language learners use during the teaching phase. The main objectives of research on language learning strategy are identifying and comparing more and less successful learners ' strategies (Chamot, 2001) and then teach the poorer learners to enhance their learning using the better strategies (Rubin, 1975). This is because less capable learners always use learning strategies in a hurry without knowing how to define the most appropriate learning strategies.

According to Wenden (1991), there are seven criteria for good language learners that can be used to guide students in selecting the best approaches for language learning. Many other researchers had come out with their own lists of good language learners' characteristics, for instance Rubin and Thompson (1982) and Lightbown and Spada (1997). Hedge (2000) had come out with a list that focuses on 'Self-directed learners, ' defining these learners as motivated to learn and ready to do whatever it takes to fulfill the job. It is probable that students with excellent approaches and who are independent will be more effective than students who depend on teacher for everything and who blindly obey without attempting to process the data and make it their own. All the findings from these past studies suggested that good language strategies might benefits us in a way that they can be used to develop language proficiency more effectively.

Research on Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are "unique ideas or behaviors used by people to understand, learn or maintain new information" (O'Malley & Chamot,1990). Strategies for language learning are known to encourage learning and to boost learner-driven learning. There has been extensive research on language learning strategies in Malaysia since mid-90s. The following presents some of the studies conducted in this area using second language learners as the subjects.

A study conducted by Lee (2016) to identify strategies for language learning used by ESL learners among native primary school students in the suburbs in Mukah, Sarawak showed variations in reactions to language learning strategies. It was indicated that students were mild listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary users and low speaking strategies users. The strategy of speaking was the least commonly used. This could be because oral skills, particularly speaking skills were not emphasized in examination, resulting in low confidence level among students of primary level.

Ismail & Ab Jabar (2010) performed a survey to explore the language learning strategies used by first year TESL students. The study's descriptive results proposed that learners used learning strategies regularly. The most frequently used metacognitive strategies and the least commonly used are social strategies.

In another study on advanced speakers of English in the first semester of the two-year graduate program by Lee and Heinz (2016), students have been identified using metacognitive strategies including disciplined language learning as well as progress monitoring. It was also found that cognitive strategies like reading aloud, and text assessment were effective for the students. The findings also suggest that for effective language learning, autonomy of learners demonstrated in self-regulated learning operations can be essential.

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Research done by Aziz & Shah (2020) successfully identified LLS for English language learners in Polytechnic while research by Chanderan & Hashim (2022) successfully found their LLS for undergraduate students. Another study by Sukying (2021) showed that affective strategies were used the most frequent by the EFL university learners.

In a study to explore management and engineering students ' English learning strategies in a University in Indonesia found that students from both courses use almost the same strategies in learning the language (Mandasari & Oktaviani, 2018). It should be noted in this context that learning English as a foreign language is different from learning English as a second language. It is important to take into consideration that the distinction between the EFL environment and the ESL environment may affect the learning strategies that learners prefer.

However, most of the studies found were to explore the LLS used tertiary level students. There were limited numbers of research for primary school students and specifically those in rural areas. The studies found did not cover language learning strategies for rural students in Tenom district of Sabah. Thus, this study is significant to help primary school students in rurals areas to identify their best LLS to learn English as a second language effectively.

Research Design

The study occupied a quantitative design. Quantitative research collects numerical data that could be categorized, ranked and measured in measurement units (McLeod, 2017). This was illustrated by using Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to depict the best LLS for the respondents. The adapted instrument consists of 31 items and divided into six parts. Data from SILL were tabulated and categorised into six parts using Likert scale (always, sometimes, never). The percentages for each item in SILL were compared and contrast to show the dominant language learning strategy. The research used data triangulation by using questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

Respondents

The sampling technique used is purposive sampling technique and all students chosen for the study were from Murut ethnicity who studied in three different rural schools in Tenom district of Sabah. The study involved 60 Year 6 students. The students selected are of intermediate proficiency in English. This study's sample was similar in socio-economic status with most of them coming from similar social backgrounds and cultures.

The research adopts convenience sampling as its sampling techniques. Sampling convenience referred as particular non-probability sampling technique based on data collected from people who are conveniently available for study purposes (Methodology, 2015). In addition, Year 6 students are selected for this study because as they are sitting and preparing for the coming examination, it was assumed that these students have the most English vocabulary.

Data Collection

The questionnaires had been printed and distributed to the students to answer. The adapted questionnaire consisted of statements for each language strategies.

The adapted inventory consisted of 31 items in six parts: Part A contains seven items to identify the students' memory strategies; Part B contains nine items to investigate the students' cognitive strategies: Part C contains four items to identify students' compensation strategies: Part D contains five items to detect students' meta-cognitive: Part E contains three items to identify the affective strategies of the students: Part F contains three items to find out students' social strategies.

The researcher gathered data by asking participants to fill the questionnaire from the adapted inventory. The data collection was conducted in a few stages. First, participants were notified of the significance of their contributions to the study's achievement before conducting this inventory. Students were clearly explained that this was not an exam; it was a study that needed careful consideration of the answers.

Second, the questionnaire was distributed the selected participants and they answered 31 of the items in the inventory within two period of English lesson. It was noted by the researcher that some of the participants need explanations on some of the items in the inventory.

Data Analysis

The responses from all the items in the inventory were analysed using statistical descriptive analysis by conducting frequency count. Responses were counted and then tabulated in percentages form to allow holistic view. The responses of the students later categorised into three namely 'always', 'sometimes' and 'never' frequency use of language strategy. Interviews were analysed by identifying emerging themes.

FINDINGS

Table 1: SILL's results for memory strategies

No.	Question Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
	Memory Strategies. The learner:			
1.	associates new English words with what he/she already know.	50%	50%	0%

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No.	Question Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
2.	makes drawing, either in head or on paper, to help remember a new word.	56.3%	31.3%	12.5%
3.	learns new words in sentences.	40.6%	37.5%	21.9%
4.	uses flash cards to remember new words.	43.8%	40.6%	15.6%
5.	reviews often.	31.3%	53.1%	15.6%
6.	oftens review newly learned vocabulary or expressions by repeatedly writing.	18.8%	31.3%	50%
7.	oftens review newly learned vocabulary or expressions by repeatedly mouthing.	15.6%	43.8%	40.6%

The results showed that half of the learners (50%) often equate new English terms with what they already know, and another 50% sometimes use this technique, and no "never" answer has been picked. With respect to the second item, that is, "makes drawing, either in head or on paper, to help remember a new word," it was found that most of the respondents employed this strategy (56.3 %), 31.1% always used this strategy while 12.5% never used it at all. The results also show that majority of the learners (40.6%) "always learns new words in sentences" while 37.5% indicating "sometimes" and 21.9% indicating "never". Majority of the participants (43.8%) always "use flashcards to remember new words" while 40.6% of them sometimes used this strategy, and 15.6% never utilized this strategy. The result also showed that 53.1% of the learners sometimes reviews often, while 31.3% selected "always" and only 15.6% never used the strategy. As for the item "often review newly learned vocabulary or expressions by repeatedly writing", half of the respondents chose never (50%), while 31.3% and 18.8% indicated "sometimes" and "always" respectively. Almost a similar response was obtained for "often review newly learned vocabulary or expressions by repeatedly mouthing" item for options "sometimes" (43.8%) and "never" (40.6%) with 15.6% always used this method.

Table 2: SILL's results for cognitive strategies

No.	Question Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
	Cognitive Strategies. The learner:			
1.	tries to imitate the English-speaking people, so that he/she can pronounce words correctly when speaking English.	18.8 %	68.8%	12.5%
2.	always practice English alphabet sounds.	28.1%	37.5%	34.4%
3.	oftens watch TV in English or listen to English tapes or CDs.	37.5%	37.5%	25%
4.	read books in English.	25%	59.4%	15.6%
5.	works with English computer programs.	12.5%	18.8%	68.8%
6.	tried to find opportunities outside the school to practice English.	15.6%	34.4%	50%
7.	finds similarities in pronunciation between Malay and English.	15.6%	59.4%	25%
8.	Makes an effort to understand the sense of what he/she reads or hear without translating word for word.	15.6%	34.4%	50%
9.	try to discover grammar rules of the English language.	12.5%	43.6%	43.9%

The results showed that more than half the students (68.8%) sometimes "tried to imitate the English-speaking people as a method to pronounce the words correctly when speaking English, while 18.8% always used this method; however, 12.5% never used this method. While it was found that 28.1% always "always practice English alphabet sounds", 37.5% sometimes used this strategy and almost the same number (34.4%) selected "never." The findings also revealed that the same number of participants employed "often watch TV in English or listen to English tapes or CDs" for option "always" (37.5%) and "sometimes" (37.5%), with 25% never used this strategy at all. More than half of the students (59.4%) chose option "always" for "read books in English" item, while 25% chose "sometimes" and 15.6% chose "never". Majority of the students (68.8%) never did "works with English computer programs" while 18.8% and 12.5% responded to "sometimes" and "always" respectively. Half of the learners (50%) never "tried to find opportunities outside the school to practice English, while 34.4% selected "sometimes" and 15.6% always used this strategy. For the next item, that is, "finds similarities in pronunciation between Malay and English", more than half of the learners (59.4%) chose "sometimes" as the option, while 25% and 15.6% chose "never" and "always" respectively. It was also revealed that half of the subjects (50%) never "makes an effort to understand the sense of what he or she read or hear without translating word for word" while 34.4% selected "sometimes" for this strategy and another 15.6% selected "always" for this strategy. While it was found that 12.5% always "try to discover grammar rules of the English language, 43.6% sometimes used this strategy, almost the same number (43.9%) selected "never".

Table 3: SILL's results for compensation strategies

No.	Question Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
	Compensation Strategies. The learner:			

No.	Question Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
1.	tries to guess the meaning by looking at the rest of the sentence when hear or read a new English word.	25%	34.4%	40.6%
2.	uses gestures to express what he/she wants to say when he/she has trouble in making people to understand his/her English.	12.5%	40.6%	46.9%
3.	asks for help when he/she doesn't know a word in English.	59.4%	40.6%	0%
4.	tries to find another way to say what he/she means when he/she can't find an expression in English.	25%	25%	50%

It was found that most of the participants (40.6%) never "try to guess the meaning by looking at the rest of the sentence when hear or read a new English word", with 34.4% indicating "sometimes" response; the remaining 25% of the participants always utilized this strategy. The findings also showed that only 12.5% of the students always "using gestures to express what they want to say when they have trouble in making people to understand their English," with almost the same number of students opted the option "sometimes" (40.6%) and "never" (46.9%). More than half of the students (59.4%) always "ask for help when they don't know a word in English", 40.6% sometimes employed this strategy and nobody select "never" as a response. With respect to the item "tries to find another way to say what he/she means when can't find expression in English," it was discovered that half of the respondents (50%) never used this method at all, with the same number of participants (25%) chose "always" and "sometimes".

Table 4: SILL's results for metacognitive strategies

No.	Question Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
	Metacognitive Strategies. The learner:			
1.	organizes his/her time to study English.	18.8%	37.5%	43.8%
2.	look for occasions to speak English.	9.3%	43.8%	46.9%
3.	listens attentively when someone speak to his/her in English,	15.6%	43.8%	40.6%
4.	worries about his/her progress in learning English.	25%	50%	25%
5.	analyses the errors he/she made and try not to repeat them.	15.6%	40.6%	43.8%

The data revealed that most of the respondents (43.8%) never "organised time to study English, with 37.5% indicating "sometimes" and only 18.8% of the remaining indicating "always" for this strategy. Majority of the students never did "look for occasions to speak English," while 43.8% responded to "sometimes" and only 9.3% chose the "always" option. With regards to the item "listen attentively when someone speak in English," it was discovered that almost the same number or participants chose the options "sometimes" (43.8%) and "never" (40.6%), with only 15.6% always used this strategy. While it was found that half of the subjects (50%) sometimes "worry about their progress in learning English", the same number of respondents (25%) chose "always and "never" as the response. Almost a similar number of students employed "analyses the errors made and try not to repeat them" for option "sometimes" (40.6%) and "never" (43.8%), with only 15.6% always used the method.

Table 5: SILL's results for affective strategies

No.	Question Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
	Affective Strategies. The learner:			
1.	tries to relax whenever he/she is stressed by the idea of speaking English.	31.3%	53.1%	15.6%
2.	tries to encourage his/herself to speak English even if he/she is afraid to make mistakes.	6.3%	34.4%	59.4%
3.	rewards his/herself when succeed.	15.6%	34.4%	50%

It was found that most of the participants (51.1%) sometimes "try to relax whenever they feel stressed by the idea of speaking English" with 31.3% indicating "always" response; the remaining 15.6% of the participants never used this strategy. More than half (59.4%) never "try to encourage themselves to speak English even if they are afraid to make mistakes," while 34.4% sometimes used this strategy and only 6.3% always used this strategy. The findings also revealed that half of the students (50%) never "rewards themselves when succeed", with 34.4% and 15.6% selected "sometimes" and "always" respectively.

Table 6: SILL's results for social strategies

No.	Question Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
	Social Strategies. The learner:			
1.	asks the person to help him/her by speaking slowly, repeating or clarifying what has been said if he/she doesn't understand what is said to his/her in English.	15.6%	25%	59.4%

2.	practices English with his/her parents, siblings or classmates.	28.1%	40.6%	31.3%
3.	interested in and willing to learn the culture of English-speaking countries.	40.6%	34.4%	25%

The results showed that more than half of the participants (59.4%) never "asks the person to help them by speaking slowly, repeating or clarifying what has been said if they didn't understand what is said to them in English," only 15.6% always utilised this strategy while 25% sometimes used this method. The data also revealed that 28.1% of the subjects always "practice English with their parents, siblings or classmates," with a majority of 40.6% sometimes did so; the remaining 31.3% did not prefer the strategy. Finally, 40.6% of the learner, which was the majority, always "interested in and willing to learn the culture of English-speaking countries," with 34.4% sometimes used this strategy and 25% never used this method.

Table 7: Comparison mean percentage for 'Always'

Strategy	Mean (%)
Memory	36
Cognitive	20
Compensation	30
Metacognitive	16
Affective	17
Social	28

The data showed that memory strategy has the highest mean percentage which is 36%. From Table 1, for memory learning strategy, the one with the highest percentage is the item that says drawings help the students remember the new word better. The compensation strategy has the second highest mean percentage, which is 30%. Meanwhile, metacognitive strategy has lowest mean percentage which is 16%. The second lowest strategy is affective strategy (17%) and the third lowest strategy is cognitive strategy (20%).

DISCUSSION
The findings of this study display that memory and compensation strategy are the most preferred learning strategies by the students in the rural area of Tenom when learning and studying English language. There may be some factors affecting their preferred LLS. One of them may be because of the level of difficulties of the language. For primary school, they usually learn basic English language. Therefore, learning using visual aids are the most effective one, causing them to favour using memory strategy. Second language learners tend to rely on visuals and photographs to help recall the meaning of English words for example flash cards, pictures or images used by teachers in the classroom during lesson. This is because visualizing and illustrating the meaning of words could help learners to sustain the learning of their language. This result is supported by Na & Trang (2022) that claimed visual aids is an effective tool to teach and motivate learners to memorize words.

The study also shows that many rural areas students also favoured compensation strategy. Students have been found not to be timid when asking the teachers for clarity about things they don't understand. Asking for help will encourage them to develop their experience of learning language. According to Bayuong, Hashim & Yunus (2019), in order for language learners to learn ESL they need good LLS to direct the learning process. This is consistent with the finding that showed the students use compensation strategy to compensate their learning of the language. It depicts that students are motivated to learn English by asking for help and they did not withdraw when he or she doesn't know a word in English.

The least preferred learning strategy is metacognitive strategy. The findings showed that students in the rural areas appear to have less practice of using English on their own or outside the formal setting. They did not seem to realize the importance of language practice with their family and friends; therefore, their language learning interactions often happened during English lessons only. As Sani & Ismail (2021) stated that metacognitive strategies help young learners to have the motivation to self-monitor their own learning but the finding of this research showed that majority of the students still fully depended on teachers in their learning progress. As for that, they do not prefer to use metacognitive strategy as their best LLS.

CONCLUSION
To conclude, the findings of the study provide a better understanding of the different ways the students' approach language learning. Ramsden (1992) states that understanding the learners ' learning experience is a way for teachers to develop their language teaching. In the study, a variation and different preferences in the learning strategies used were revealed. The results can contribute positively to the field of teaching languages as educators would get more insight into the language learning needs of the students. This research suggests teachers should be mindful of the many approaches that the students did not use in language learning. Therefore, teachers should be educated of the different LLS and use more effective strategies that are appropriate to the learners' learning styles.

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Furthermore, systematic and strategic language instructions should be incorporated more into the English language curriculum content to enhance students' language learning strategies.

It is hoped that this research will help the teachers in the rural areas to understand the best teaching methods to suit students' language learning strategy. In the next cycle, research could be done to understand the factors affecting the students' preferred language learning strategies in the rural areas. This further research would help educators to better understand the implementation of learning strategies and to enhance the quality of language learning in ESL contexts.

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