Malaysian ESL Learners' Use of Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract. Language learning strategies (LLSs) are the intentional thoughts which can accelerate the learning process. Effective use of these strategies can lead to greater success in language learning and increased autonomy on the parts of learners. The aims of this study were to investigate the differences in the use of LLSs among Malaysian students of different years of study and gender and to identify the relevant strategy models. Mixed Method design was used as this study is an amalgamation of quantitative and qualitative studies. All Bachelor's degree students majoring in English Literature at the School of Language Studies of Univerisiti Kebangsaan Malaysia were involved in the quantitative section of this research. Moreover, a total of 30 English Literature students participated in the interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using the Multivariate Analysis of Variance to identify any significant differences in strategy use among the students. Furthermore, qualitative data were analyzed using the NVIVO. The relevant qualitative data were also categorized through open-coding procedure, refined by the axial-coding procedure integrated via the selective-coding procedure. The results showed that the year variable influenced students' use of strategies. However, gender did not have any effects on students' use of the strategies. The analyses of qualitative data also lead to the emergence of six qualitative models. Each of the models dealt with one of the strategy categories of memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies. Findings of this study provided a deeper understanding on strategy use among language learners in general and Malaysian learners in particular.

Keywords: language learning strategies, university students, NVIVO, year, gender, qualitative models

1. Introduction

Presently, two main types of strategies have been identified in the field of second/foreign language acquisition: communication strategies (CSs) and learning strategies (LSs). The first type of strategies (communication strategies) is not directly related to the process of language learning because its purpose is to get meaning across. Communication strategies are mostly used in the process of transferring messages to other people (Ya-ni 2007). However, learning strategies are more associated with the process of receiving messages from other people and have to do with the input received. Different researchers have defined language learning strategies (LLSs) in different ways. However, in this study, Oxford's (1990) definition has been adopted. In her definition, language learning strategies are regarded as specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more self-directed and more enjoyable.

This research aims at answering the following questions:

- Is there a difference in the use of the six strategy categories among selected Malaysian students of different year of study and gender?
- What are the strategy models revealed by Malaysian students' interviews?

2. Classifications of Language Learning Strategies

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Different classifications of language learning strategies have been provided by different researchers. Some of these classifications are more popular while some seem to enjoy less popularity. In O'Malley's (1985) classification of language learning strategies, the strategies were divided into three categories of metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies. Rubin (1981, cited in Mohamed Amin Embi, 2000) proposed a classification scheme which subsumed learning strategies under two primary groupings and a number of subgroups. Her two major categories were a) strategies that contribute indirectly to learning such as using production tricks and creating opportunities for practice and b) cognitive learning strategies which directly pave the way for learning and that includes verification, guessing, deductive reasoning, memorization, and monitoring of errors. On the other hand, Rubin (1987) classified LLSs into three types of learning strategies, communicative strategies and social strategies. Stern (1992) also presented a five category classification of management and planning, cognitive, communicative-experiential, interpersonal and affective for LLSs. Oxford (1990) classified language learning strategies into the six categories of 'memory strategies', 'cognitive strategies', 'compensation strategies', 'metacognitive strategies', 'affective strategies' and 'social strategies'. The first three are considered by her as 'direct learning strategies', and the rest are regarded as 'indirect learning strategies'.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study comprised all university students studying English Literature at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics of Univerisiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. All the participants of the present study were chosen from one level of education referred to here as undergraduate (B.A. students). Cluster sampling was used whereby the entire population of interest was divided into clusters and a random sample of these clusters was selected. As all the units within a cluster are selected, the sampling procedure of this study is the one-stage cluster sampling. This kind of sampling procedure has the three main advantages of feasibility, economy and reduced variability. As undergraduate English Literature students of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia were involved in this study, the entire population was divided into clusters of freshmen, sophomores and juniors. From each of these clusters one class was randomly chosen. In other words, one class was selected from freshmen, one from sophomores and one from juniors. On the whole 64 four students participated in quantitative phase of the study and nearly half of them (30 students) were involved in the qualitative phase.

3.2. Instruments

The necessary data were collected using two different instruments. The first instrument was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). As SILL has been the most frequently used language learning strategy questionnaire and the reliability and validity of it has been checked in multiple ways and in various communities (Oxford, 1996), it was chosen for the present study. Many researchers have found this questionnaire useful and thus used the questionnaire in their studies. In Malaysia, researchers such as Mohamed Amin Embi (1996) and Tan Teow, Hairul Nizam Ismail and Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan (2010) applied this questionnaire. The questionnaire was first devised by Oxford (1990) and included 50 items. This pen and paper survey consists of 50 items to which students are supposed to respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'always'. Oxford's classification of learning strategies encompasses six aspects of the language learning strategies. Semi-structured interviews were also used and interview guides were applied.

3.3.1 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The reliability of the questionnaire was established via Cronbach's alpha. It is an internal consistency reliability coefficient measuring the degree to which items agree with each other. The SILL was administered to a pilot group which was randomly selected in Malaysia. The Cronbach's alpha for the whole questionnaire was found to be .91. Although the SILL questionnaire has previously been checked for validity and has been validated in different ways, it was validated again in this study by several professors and experts in the field.

Cohen's kappa can estimate the interrater reliability of interviews. Cohen's kappa coefficient is a statistical measure of inter-rater agreement (reliability) and it was used for measuring the validity of the qualitative data. Landis and Koch (1977) have classified the strength of agreement among raters into different categories. Zero signifies lack of agreement and 1 designates total agreement among raters. The interrater agreement reliability for interviews turned to be 0.82. This value reflects high strengths of agreement and reliabilities of interviews.

4. Results

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine any effect of year of study on the six strategy categories of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Levene's test turned to be non-significant suggesting the fact that the error variances of the dependent variables are equal across groups. This finding allowed the MANOVA to be used to analyze any differences between students of different years in relation to the six strategy categories. Findings from the multivariate test of Wilk's Test yielded a Wilks' Lambda = .779, F (12, 112) =1.105, p =0.363 and η^2= .106 for the six strategy inventory of memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive and affective strategies. The results of the multivariate test are displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Multivariate Test Conducted for the Six Strategy Categories by Year of Study

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Significance	Partial Eta Squared
Age	.779	1.105	12	112	.363	.106

To determine the effects of dependent variables of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies, univariate analysis of variance was conducted. Students of different year of study were compared and it was found that sophomores obtained the highest means for cognitive strategies (M= 3.607, SD= .441), compensation strategies (M= 3.340, SD= .666), metacognitive strategies (M= 3.350, SD= .435), affective strategies (M= 4.050, SD= .552) and social strategies (M=4.050, SD=.552). In addition, juniors obtained the highest mean for memory strategies (M= 3.250, SD= .991). The results revealed there was a significant year of study main effect for metacognitive strategies (F [2, 61] = 3.454, p=.038). Table 2 below shows the results of univariate analysis. It can be suggested that year of study can affect Malaysian university students' use of metacognitive strategies.

Table 2 Univariate Analysis (Tests of Between-Subjects Effects)

Source	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Memory Strategies	1.694	2	.847	2.302	.106
Cognitive Strategies	1.827	2	.914	2.810	.066
Compensation Strategies	.343	2	.172	.380	.685
Metacognitive Strategies	6.800	2	3.400	7.017	.001
Affective Strategies	3.658	2	1.829	2.938	.058
Social Strategies	3.382	2	1.691	2.772	.068

Data obtained for Malaysian students of different gender revealed that error variance of dependent variables were equal across groups and the assumptions of homogeneity of error variances were not violated among groups. The multivariate test for Malaysian students' of different gender yielded a Wilks' Lambda = .933, F (6, 57) = .765, p =0.60. Moreover, the results of the univariate analysis revealed that there wasn't a significant gender main effect for any of the six strategy categories. It seemed that Malaysian students' gender did not have any influences on any of the six strategy categories of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

NVIVO, which is the statistical software for the analysis of qualitative data related to interviews, was used in this study to find the general themes. Later, the three coding procedures of open-coding, axial-coding and selective-coding were conducted. During the open-coding procedure, the relevant categories were

identified and the strategies which students used were illuminated. After the open-coding process, the themes were categorized through the axial-coding in which data were put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), in the axial-coding procedure, themes can be refined, developed and related. The central categories which were obtained were tied together and related during the selective-coding procedure. In this procedure, strategy categories, major codes, subthemes, interpretations were provided.

One of the questions asked during the interviews was "How do you learn new English words or new expressions? (Which strategies do you use?)" This question is related to memory strategies used by language learners. These strategies can help students remember new words and expressions in English. The responses revealed by data analysis were 'by watching movies', 'by learning from friends', 'by conversing with others', 'by reading novels', 'by doing revisions', by learning through the lecture' and 'by searching in the dictionary'. Figure 1 below shows the model related to memory strategies.
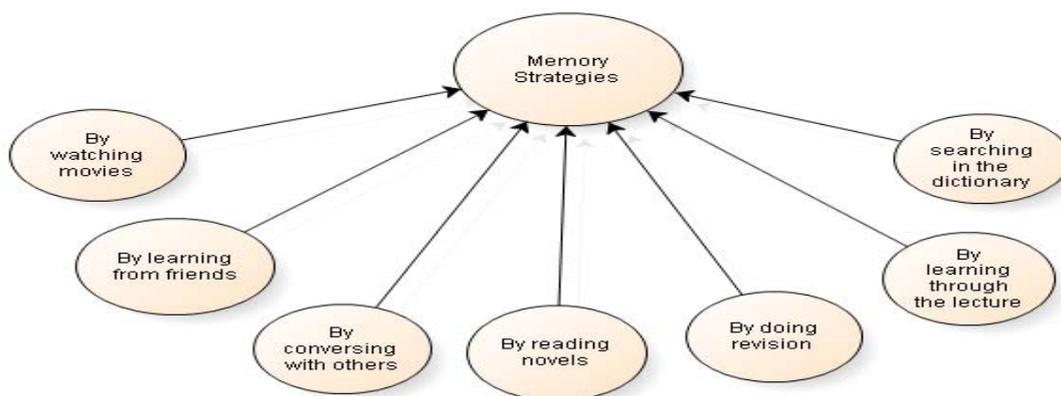

Figure 1 Memory Model for Malaysia Students' Use of Strategies as Revealed from Interviews

The three coding procedures of open-coding, axial coding and selective coding were used and the major core categories were identified. In addition, strategies were related to the pertinent core categories. These categories were put under the general label of memory strategy category. The core categories included 'Using resources for learning and remembering words' and 'reviewing'. The results of the coding procedures are displayed in Table 3 below.

Table 3 General Themes Related to the Memory Category together with Major Codes

General Themes (Specific Strategies)	Major Code
Watching movies	Using resources for learning and remembering words
Learning from friends	Using resources for learning and remembering words
Conversing with others	Using resources for learning and remembering words
Reading novels	Using resources for learning and remembering words
Doing revisions	Reviewing
Learning through the lecture	Using resources for learning and remembering words
Searching in the dictionary	Using resources for learning and remembering words

Moreover, the qualitative analysis revealed five other qualitative models for interviews which emerged for each of the strategy categories of compensation, cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The coding procedures revealed the major code categories of 'switching to the mother tongue', 'getting help', 'trying to increase linguistic knowledge to reach mastery in language', 'adjusting or approximating' and 'using mime or gesture' for compensation strategies, 'creating structure for input and output', 'practicing' and 'preparing' for cognitive strategies, 'evaluating' and 'arranging and planning learning' for metacognitive strategies, 'feeling relaxed', 'feeling nervous', 'showing a positive attitude' and 'not showing a positive attitude' for affective strategies and 'getting help', 'trying to increase linguistic knowledge to reach mastery

in language', 'switching to the mother tongue', 'adjusting or approximating' and 'using mime or gesture' for social strategies.

5. Conclusion

Findings of this research provided a deeper understanding on strategy use among language learners in general and Malaysian learners in particular. This study examined students' strategy use in relation to factors such as year of study and gender. The results of the quantitative data analysis showed that the variable of year of influenced Malaysian students use of strategies. However, such influences were not observed for the variable of gender. Qualitative coding procedures were also conducted for interviews and transcribed data were categorized through open-coding, axial-coding and selective coding. Interviews resulted in six qualitative models which emerged for each of the strategy categories. Learning strategies need to be explicitly taught to language learners. It is hoped that the results of this research will encourage ESL practitioners to explicate the significance of language learning strategies to their students and to give students explicit instruction on language learning strategies.

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