Language Learning Strategies and Academic Achievement Among Esl Students

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ABSTRACT

Learning strategies is a conscious thought process that a learner use to help them to comprehend, learn or remember new information. Understanding and practising learning strategies lead to a successful academic achievement in language learning. Various researches have been done and documented on learning strategies and the academic achievement among ESL students. This article will define concepts of language learning strategy and brief classification on learning strategies. It also will review a few articles on learning strategies which are proposed by researchers and explore the relationship between learning strategies and academic achievement.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, Academic achievement, ESL students.

1. Introduction

Today, English language is spoken throughout the world. Chuang Wang et, al. (2013) claim that English is spoken in 188 countries and also an official language in about 88 countries. Since English has become a language used widely, many have come to understand the importance of learning and mastering it. Malaysia is not exempted from this scenario. English is learnt as the second language besides Bahasa Melayu which is the first and national language of the country.

The importance of English language came into revelation when ETEMs (English for Teaching Mathematics and Science) was introduced and implemented in schools in year 2002. However, ETEMs was abolished in 2012. Johari et al., (2006) cited in Parmjit Singh, Arba Abdul Rahman & Teoh Sian Hood (2010) conducts a study and claims that 120 rural Form Two learners found to have faced learning difficulties due to English being used to teach Mathematics. Thus, this may be the core reason for the programme to fail. Because of this, the government introduced the "Upholding Bahasa Melayu and Strengthening English" program under the Tenth Malaysia plan for 2011-2015 (The Economic Planning Unit). The primary reason of implementing this plan is to enhance English proficiency among Malaysians to prepare them to be competitive besides exploring new knowledge for national and international level. Moreover, English language will become a compulsory subject to pass in the SPM examination from 2016 onwards. This clearly shows that the government and educators do take learning and mastering English seriously.

However, English is a language which is difficult for learners today to master. This has become an issue among second language a learner who gets little exposure to the language. This is further stated in an article published by the New Straits Times (2013) reported that the recent UPSR examination showed a decline of those getting 'A', 'B' and 'C' in English. This also shows that English is a critical subject among learners.

To learn a second language effectively, a learner needs to have and understand certain learning strategies in order to be successful. Oxford (2003) stated that second language learning strategies are behaviours and thought processes that students use to enhance his/her second language learning. By using an appropriate learning strategy, a learner can attain better in language learning and academic achievement.

This paper will discuss further on the language learning strategies used among second language learners and its relativity towards academic achievement.

1.1. Purpose

The awareness about language learning strategy is important to learners as it can help them to master the second language effectively and have better academic achievement. Therefore, a huge number of researches has been conducted to investigate the relationship between learning strategies and academic achievement. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to determine if language learning strategies contribute to learners' academic achievement. This study is done to answer these questions below:
i. How do language learning strategies contribute to academic achievement?
ii. How do learners apply language learning strategies in learning the second language?

1.2. Methodology

This study is conducted via the online library of University Kebangsaan Malaysia and in Tun Sri Lanang. The major searches for the study are conducted via the Internet. E –journals of various publications helped to gain more information for the intended study. Besides, Google Scholar also was used to narrow down searches specifically. Keywords such as "language learning strategies", "academic achievement", "learning strategies among ESL learners' are used to search for academic journals. Besides, books are also used to construct the review of literature.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Overview of Language Learning Strategies

Over the past decades, many researches have been done on language learning strategies among second language learners. Chamot (2004) defines that learning strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal. Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) cited in Zare (2012) also claim learning strategies as intentional behaviour and thoughts that learners make use during learning in order to understand, learn or remember new information. Meanwhile, Cohen (1990) claims that learning strategies are processes consciously selected by learners to enhance learning a second language or foreign language through storage, retention, recall and application about that language (Zare, 2012). Chamot's and Cohen's definition above clearly define that learning strategies are chosen by learners for the purpose of successful academic achievement. Hence, learning occurs at a learner's own pace and will.

Generally, a good language learner usually has his/her favoured learning strategies. One learner may favour a particular learning strategy while the other may not favour the same as every individual differ from each other. Researches done by (Cohen 1998; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford 1990a and Reid 1995, 1998) cited in Yi Chen Lu (2007) reveals the fact that every learner has different ways to approach personal goals through different learning strategy preferences that help them to learn more effectively. Chamot (2005) adds up that a by using a specific learning strategy can help a learner to achieve success in learning. Moreover, Oxford (1990) cited in Oxford (2003) also asserts that learning will be easy, fast and effective if; (a) the strategy relates well to the second language task at hand (b) the strategy fits students' learning style preferences and (c) the students employ the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies. This implies that when an appropriate learning strategy is used by a learner, it may help towards a successful, self-directed, enjoyable and effective language learning. Picking up an appropriate learning strategy may help a learner to have better academic achievement.

Oxford (1995) cited in Oxford (2003) also asserts that a study which was done among learners of English in Puerto Rico revealed that successful students used strategies in learning as compared to less successful learners. Findings on learning strategies by (Lee 2003; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Rahimi et al. 2008; Griffiths 2003; Hong 2006; and Oxford 1993) cited in Zare (2012) further reveal that the use of learning strategies helps a learner to better proficiency and mastery of the target language. Therefore, the use of learning strategies do help a learner to master a language and perform well in academic. However, Chamot (2004) utters that learners need to learn how to use strategies that they find effective for the kinds of tasks they need to accomplish in the second language.

To sum up, the literature review helps to lighten that not all learning strategies can help towards successful language learning, but using the preferred learning strategies may help a student to become a successful and proficient language learner.

3. Taxonomy of Language Learning

Rubin (1975) cited in Griffith (2004) identified learning strategies into two, those which have contribute directly and indirectly to language learning. Rubin classified learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies as types of strategies that contribute directly and indirectly to language learning. She divided direct strategies into clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning and practise while indirect strategies are creating opportunities for practise and production tricks (Griffith, 2004). On the other hand, O'Malley (1985) cited in Zare (2012) distributed learning strategies into three categories which are metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective. Hence, it can be seen that language learning strategies is classified respectively by researchers based on their research findings. However, Zare (2012) further added that Oxford (1990) has developed a detailed and systematic taxonomy of strategies for language learners.

Oxford (1990) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) divided learning strategies into two which are direct and indirect strategies. She divided direct strategies into three sub-elements which are memory, cognitive and compensation strategies while indirect strategies into metacognitive, affective and social. This learning strategy classification later led to the Strategy Inventory Learning Strategy (SILL) which is used in many researches.

Mohamed Amin Embi & Mohd Zaki Mohd Amin (2010) in their book "Strategies for Successful English Language Learning" state direct strategies directly involve the target language and mental processing of the language. Oxford (2003) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) asserts that memory strategy helps to link a language item or concept without deep understanding. Furthermore, Oxford (1990) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) also claims that learners rarely admit of using the memory strategy. Memory strategy could be used at the initial stage of language learning and learners tend to opt to other strategies which could enhance their learning. Studies done by Kato (1996) cited in Oxford (2003) learners used memory strategy to memorize a large of Kanji characters of the Japanese language. However, this strategy does not have any significant relationship with learners' second language proficiency. On the other hand, Purpura (1997) cited in Oxford (2003) found that memory strategy is preferred when a learner takes test and test performance in grammar and vocabulary.

Oxford and Ehrman (2005) cited in Iverson (2005) believe teachers identify that effective and higher aptitude learners use cognitive strategies more often. Moreover, Oxford (1990) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) also states that cognitive strategy is the most popular learning strategy used by learners. So, this specifies that cognitive strategy helps learners to have better academic achievement thus being used commonly by them.

According to Oxford (1990) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) compensation strategies usually used to compensate grammar and vocabulary repertoire and they act as auto gap fillers. Learners who fail to get the right word to verbalize may use body gestures to convey the meaning effectively. Oxford (1990) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) also says that learners who use compensation strategies communicated better. Moreover, Little (1999) and Oxford (1990, 1990a) cited in Oxford (2003) claim that compensation strategy encourages language use as well as language learning. Zare (2012) shares the same view that compensation strategies let a learner to use target language in speaking or writing despite knowledge gaps. This strategy helps a learner to communicate sooner or later.

According to Mohamed Amin Embi and Mohd Zaki Mohd Amin (2010) in their book "Strategies for Successful English Language Learning" explains indirect strategy as the strategy used to help and manage second language learning indirectly. Below are the sub-groups of indirect strategies; metacognitive, affective and social strategy.

This strategy is implied by learners who has higher proficiency in second language. Cohen (1998) cited in Iverson (2005) says that higher proficiency learners use this strategy effectively. Moreover learners who engage in metacognitive strategy manage their own learning process (Zare, 2012). A study conducted in Africa by Dreyer & Oxford (1996) and Oxford, Judd & Giesen (1998) in Turkey cited in Oxford (2005) reveals that metacognitive strategy is a sound contributor for second language proficiency. Metacognitive strategy also allows learners to control their own thinking and cognition (Zare, 2012).

Affective strategy is a strategy where a learner's feelings are involved indirectly. Oxford (1990) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) utters that affective strategy involves one's emotions, attitudes, motivation and values. She also added that when a learner has positive feeling towards learning a second language, it results to a better performance. A research done by Dreyer and Oxford (1996) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) shows that affective strategy is significant to learners' academic achievement. Zare (2012) also claims that this strategy helps learners to control their emotions, motivations and attitudes associated to learning.

Hence, affective strategy can be significant to academic achievement if a learner is optimistic towards his/her emotions, motivations and attitudes.

Oxford (1990) cited in Ozyilmez (2012) says that social strategy allows learners to work with people using the target language as well as learning the target culture. Moreover, Oxford (2003) also claims that asking questions to get verification, clarification of a confusing point and exploring social and cultural norms of the target language assist learners to learn about the culture and language. A study done on African students by Dreyer & Oxford (1996) cited in Oxford (2003) showed significance between the use of social strategy and second language proficiency.

4. Findings
4.1. The Use of Learning Strategies and Academic Achievement

Since the mid-seventies many researches have been done on language learning strategies and its impact on students' academic achievement. Cohen (2012) claims that many studies between language learning strategies and achievement in learning a second language are investigated.

Kyungsim Hong Nam and Leavell (2006) conducted a study on 55 ESL students from Southwestern University with different cultural and linguistic background enrolled in an Intensive English Program. The study exposes that students preferred to use metacognitive strategies most and used memory and affective strategies the least. Metacognitive strategy helped them to direct, organize and plan their language learning. Another study which was done by Norhiza Ismail & Nurul Liyana binti Ab Jabar (2010) which was done among the first year TESL UHB 1412 students also revealed that frequently used strategy is metacognitive followed by cognitive, social and compensation. The researchers of both the studies used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and uncovered that metacognitive strategy is the most used strategy. This study proved that metacognitive is a strategy used by advanced learners as the respondents from both of the studies are proficient in the second language.

Moreover, Chia-Ti Tseng (n.d) conducted a qualitative study on 28 M.A and PHD students ranging from 22 – 55 years old. He used a self-report questionnaire to assess the respondents' and did a semi structured interview to gather in depth information on how the participants applied different strategies in the process and different context of English learning. Chia-Ti Tseng (n.d) also finds that metacognitive is the strategy used the most followed by social, memory and affective strategy. The study identified that participant listen to patterns, expressions, radio and music. They also read regularly using guessing techniques whenever they come across unknown words. Furthermore, they usually pay attention to how native speakers speak, mimic pronunciation, engage themselves in self-talk and read aloud. It is clear that the participants are motivated in learning and autonomous learners which encourage them to use learning strategies. Chia-Ti Tseng is able to get detailed information of his study as compared to the study done by Kyungsim Hong Nam and Leavell (2006) and Norhiza Ismail & Nurul Liyana binti Ab Jabar (2010). The semi structured interview may have helped Chia-To Tseng to get detailed information on the learning strategies used by the participant. Perhaps, the participants could have been co-operative to share their feeling and thoughts which helped to reveal much information on their learning strategies. The same scenario may not occur among adolescent participants as they are usually shy to share their feeling and thoughts. The other two researchers were using the Inventory only to gain information which may have stunt them for more in depth details.

Radovan (2011) also proves that there is a significant relationship between learning strategies and one's academic achievement. Unlike the studies above, Radovan used the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire to measure learners' motivational orientations and their use of different learning strategies. Findings show that goal setting, task value, self-efficacy and effort regulation were the strategies which led to better academic achievement. Moreover, he affirms that intrinsic motivation in a learner contributes to successful academic achievement. Even though different questionnaires were used in the studies, the findings were able to reveal that there is a significant relationship between learning strategies and academic achievement.

However, Ozyilmaz's (2012) study reveals a slight difference in his finding. He states that there is a significant difference in academic achievement between genders. He claims that females are more successful than male in academic achievement but male students are found to employ more learning strategies than their counterparts. Results show that male students use compensation strategies to learn the language. Possibly, the male students engage in conversation often that make them to apply compensation strategy. So, Ozyilmaz (2012) firmly states that there is no significance between learning strategies and academic achievement. One similarity of Ozyilmaz's study with the others is that he used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).

Similar to Ozyilmaz's study, Zahedi's and Dorrimanesh's (2008) discovered that students' higher achievement in the university courses does not have any significance with the use of their metacognitive strategies. Low achievers use metacognitive strategies frequently as compared to high achievers but the difference is not very significant. The researchers felt that metacognitive strategy was used by low achiever as they feel that they need the strategies more than their friends who belong to the high achiever group. Zahadi and Dorrimanesh suggested that successful learners do not use the metacognitive strategies often as they know their needs and use strategies efficiently. However, the number of samples involved in the study is very small where it does not permit one to draw any conclusions with certainty. Hence, to produce sound data, a researcher should involve a bigger number of samples as to get a valid and reliable data and findings.

A case study by Shirley Sharmini Rajamoney (2008) with 42 multiracial Form Four students enrolled in an urban government secondary school in Penang discloses that the students used various language learning strategies such as metacognitive, cognitive, affective, social and compensation strategies. Nevertheless, she discovered that these students were not aware of learning strategies and its benefit as they do not use English frequently. In addition, they have no confidence and shy to use English which did not let them to become an independent learner. Hence, this particular case study did not see any significance on learning strategies to academic achievement. The importance of learning strategies were not realized as these students are shy to speak in English and do not use the second language in their daily life. However, Shirley Sharmini Rajamoney (2008) states students' learning strategies can be enhanced if proper training is given to them.

Kamarul Shukri et.all, (2009) conducted a study on Form 4 students in Terengganu and found out that female students apply more learning strategies as compared to male students. They claim that female students use affective and metaphysics strategy in learning. This finding is on contrary to the findings done by Ozyilmaz (2012) where he states that male students are found to use compensation strategies as compared to their counterparts. Ozyilmaz's finding is significant as his study involved 51 female and only 39 male samples. Despite the male being the smaller number of participant, the finding revealed that male students do make use of learning strategies more often as compared to the female students.

As compared to Shirley Sharmini Rajamoney's case study and other studies above, one significant difference can be seen in the samples chosen. Shirley's samples involve school students whereby the rest of the studies involve samples who are studying at the tertiary level and they are adults. In addition, upon reviewing all the studies, it can be concluded that adult learners are aware of their learning strategies and it clearly shows that metacognitive is the most used strategy by them. This scenario is unlikely the same among young learners based on Shirley Sharmini Rajamoney's study. The form four students were not aware of the importance of learning strategies and overall all the strategies were being used by them without knowing and understanding its benefit. Thus, it portrays that besides motivation, maturity among learners also may contribute to the use of learning strategies. Adult learners tend to use better learning strategies as compared to the younger ones. Maybe, these adults realize the importance of learning strategies as they learn along the way. Hence, they become better strategy user as they turn into adult. The same may happen to the participants in Shirley Sharmini Rajamoney's study as they are still young and come to understand the importance and benefits of learning strategies sooner or later.

Hence, this shows that one should be aware on the use of his/her learning strategies so that it will lead towards a successful academic achievement.

5. Conclusion

Based on the review of previous researches done, it can be concluded that language learning strategy is important to learn the second language. Each learning strategies help in mastering second language respectively and also allow a leaner to successfully achieve academically. However, some second language learners are not aware of the importance of language learning thus making them not to use it effectively. As a result, they may not attain success in second language learning and fail to become proficient in the target language. However, if proper guidance and awareness are given on the importance of these learning strategies, learners can attain better academic achievement. Teachers can be the main source to implement learning strategies in young learners so that they have better awareness and achievement academically.

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