# A Survey on Students' Learning Styles and Strategies in a Rural Secondary School in Meradong District

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Abstract: Language learning strategies are steps taken by learners to enhance their own learning. This study aims to assess preferred learning strategies among students of a rural secondary school in Meradong district. The respondents were purposively selected to respond to the Young Learners' Language Strategy Use Survey which was developed by Andrew D. Cohen and Rebecca L. Oxford (2002). The data were collected and analysed descriptively. The study revealed writing strategies has the highest frequencies while vocabulary strategies is the least preferred strategy among the students. The findings and implication of this study may benefit ESL teachers and educators to enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching.

Keywords: learning styles, learning strategies, preference, rural secondary school

In recent year, there is a growing interest in investigating language learning strategies among second language learners. Language learners apply different and a variety of language learning strategies in acquiring a language. There are several factors that contribute to the variety of preference among second language learners. Differences in learners' proficiency level, motivation and cultural background are among the contributing factors. Hence, an initiative to discover the students' preference of learning strategies in language learning should be carried out.

## Statement of Problem

English is a language that is widely used throughout the world plays an important role in equipping our young students with the necessary skill besides granting a greater access globally which will boost the growth of our country's economic development. However, there are still students who are unable to use English competently due to lack of interest and low proficiency level (Ghabool, & Author 2012). Students often regard English as a subject that is too difficult that they give up trying to accomplish the tasks given.

Research objectives/ Research questions

This research aims to discover successful language learning strategies preferred by students in learning English in a rural secondary school in. The insights that we will gain through this research will not only help the teachers to have a better understanding of students preferable strategies but also to be able to design suitable activities and materials according to the students' needs. This research requires two research questions:

1. What are the most preferable strategies among students in enhancing their skills in learning English?
2. What are the implications on teaching and learning of English?

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

There are vast definitions of what constitutes a language learning strategies. Wenden and Rubin (1987) described language strategies as 'any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of informations(Zare 2012). According to Weinstein and Mayer (1986), language learning strategies are behaviours or thoughts that a learner engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner's encoding process(Hsiao, & Oxford 2002). In addition to that, Oxford (1990) further explained learning strategies as operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information..., specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster and more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations(Hsiao, & Oxford 2002). Hence, in other words, learning strategies are tools that a learner use effectively in order to acquire a successful language learning.

### Classification of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

Oxford (1990) Classification of Language Learning Strategies
Oxford (1990) had developed a new language learning strategy system which includes two main classifications which is the direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are specific ways that involve use of language, sub-divided into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies(Lee 2010). Memory strategy which is for remembering and retrieving new information, are consist of four sets which include creating mental linkages, applying image and sounds, reviewing well and employing action(Zare 2012). Cognitive strategies which is for understanding and producing the language, are consists of four sets which is practicing, receiving and sending message, analysing and reasoning and creating structure for input and output(Zare 2012). The last subcategory of direct strategies is the compensations strategies. Compensation strategies enable learner to use the language despite knowledge gaps include two sets which is guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing(Zare 2012).

 Indirect strategies are strategies that do not directly involved using the language , but they support language learning(Lee 2010). Indirect strategies are divided into three subcategories which includes metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Metacognitive strategies enables the learner to coordinate their own learning process by centring your learning, arranging and planning learning and evaluating own learning (Lee 2010). Affective strategies assist students to monitor their emotions, motivation and attitudes associated with learning by lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself and taking emotional temperature(Zare 2012). Social strategies is used for learning with others and are divided into three sets which is asking questions, cooperating and empathizing with others.
Rubin's (1987) Classification of Language Learning Strategies
Rigney (1978) and Rubin (1987) defined language learning strategies as behaviours, steps or techniques that language learners apply to facilitate language learning (Lee 2010). According to Rubin (1987), there are three types of strategies used by language learners that contributed directly or indirectly to language learning, namely learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies(Zare 2012). Learning strategies are divided into two types which are the cognitive learning strategies and metacognitive learning strategies. Cognitive strategies are steps or operation used in learning that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials ("Hismanoglu - Language Learning Strategies in Foreign Language Learning

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and Teaching (TESL_TEFL)" n.d.). On the other hand, metacognitive startegies help to supervise, control or self-direct learning which involve different procedures such as planning, prioritizing, setting goals and self-management(Zare 2012). Communication strategies emphasize on the process of communication through conversation and getting meaning across. Then, social strategies exposed the learners to opportunities that can be a great help to practice their knowledge(Zare 2012).

O'Malley's (1985) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

O'Malley, Chamot and their colleagues (1987; 1985) divided language learning strategies into three main categories which are metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective(Lee 2010). Metacognitive strategies refer to learners' planning their learning, thinking about the learning process, monitoring the own production and evaluating outcomes of their own learning(Lee 2010). Besides that, cognitive strategies refer to specific learning tasks which involve direct manipulation of the learning material (Zare 2012). Lastly, socio-affective strategies. In this strategies, learners are involve in social mediating activities and interaction with others. The main socio-affective strategies include cooperation and questions for clarification(Zare 2012).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research will use quantitative research design. According to Creswell (1994) a quantitative research is a type of research that explains phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods(Sukamolson 2007).

This research will use a short questionnaires consist of 10 questions that focus on five language skills which is reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary and grammar. The questionnaires were adapted from the Language Strategy Use inventory which was developed by Cohen, Oxford and Chi (2005). This questionnaires is supposed to be answered online but due to lack of internet access, the questionnaires have to be printed and distributed to the students.

This study involved 41 Form 2 students of a rural school in Meradong district. Meradong district is situated in Sarikei division and its capital is Bintangor. Bintangor has 4 secondary schools and SMK Meradong is one of them("Meradong District - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia" n.d.). There are a total of 1656 students with majority of Iban ethnicity and small groups of Malays, Melanaus and the Chinese. Form 2 students are selected for this study because of their availability to the researcher. This sample were selected because they are not the candidates for any major public examinations such as Pentaksiran tingkatan 3 (PT3) and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). Besides, the samples are going to the same school as the researcher. Hence, it is quite convenient as the researcher was able to meet the samples on daily basis in order to observe the progress of the study besides being budget friendly to the researcher.

### Sample

This research will involve forty Form 2 students from a secondary school in Meradong district. The students selected are of intermediate proficiency in English.

This research adopts convenience sampling as its sampling techniques. Convenience sampling is specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in the study (Methodology 2015). This questionnaires is supposed to be answered online but due to lack of internet access, the questionnaires have to be printed and distributed to the students.

First, the researcher gathered data by asking the students to fill the questionnaire which was adapted from Language Strategy Use Inventory developed by Cohen, Oxford and Chi

(2005). The questionnaire will be distributed to the selected ten students personally and the students are asked to return the questionnaire in a labeled box provided in the office.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research will be discussed under five types of language skills which is listening, speaking, reading, writing and vocabulary and grammar. Discussion of strategies preferred by students will be further discussed in the discussion section.

### Listening Skills

Table 1: What I do to listen more

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I listen to the radio show in the language | 17 | 15 | 9 |
| I watch TV shows in the language | 27 | 9 | 5 |
| I go to the movies that use the language | 21 | 14 | 6 |

Table 2 : What I do to understand what I hear

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| listen to important words | 26 | 13 | 2 |
| I listen for what seems interesting | 22 | 12 | 7 |
| I listen for words that are repeated | 19 | 12 | 10 |

Table 3: Strategies to overcome difficulties in listening

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I ask the person to repeat | 23 | 14 | 4 |
| I ask the person to slow down | 22 | 12 | 7 |
| I ask a question | 26 | 10 | 5 |



Figure 1: Overall analysis for listening strategies

Based on the Table 1, students were asked about what do they do to listen more. 66% or 27 out of 41 students preferred watching TV shows as their primary source of listening while movies and radio contributes 51% and 41% respectively. Listening to radio shows show the highest percentage of non-preferable source of listening with 22%. In Table 2, students were asked about what do they do to understand what they had heard of. 26 students or 63% of the students focus on the important words, 54% of the students pay attention to what seems interesting and 46% of them listen to repetitive words in order for them to understand. Then, in Table 3, students were asked about strategies that they used whenever they encounter problems

while listening. 63% of the students prefer to ask questions for a clearer idea of what the other speakers intended to say. 56% or 23 out of 41 of the students, prefer the speakers to repeat what have been said while another 54% of the students prefer the person to slow down. Based on Figure 1, 55% of the students frequently employ listening strategies and 15% of the students do not prefer listening strategies as their preferable strategies in learning English.

Based on my findings, I can conclude that TV shows are the main source of listening among students in SMK Meradong. This is because most of the participants are day schoolers so they have the privilege of watching television at any time than those who are staying in the hostel. The data also shows that the students tends to listen to important words and things that seems interesting rather than listening to repetitive words. This shows that the students strategically identifying the important and interesting parts rather than attempting to listen to the whole conversation in comprehending the message conveyed by the speaker or the media.

Besides that, students prefer to use social strategy whenever they face difficulties in listening in the language. According to Oxford's (1990), social strategies facilitate language learning through interactions with others as language is a form of social behaviour and learning it involves other people. These strategies are divided into three sets, namely as aking questions, cooperating and empathizing with others (Zare 2012). They do not hesitate to ask questions whenever they are unable to grasp the message or ideas conveyed by the speaker. This is a sign of a good language learner where they are able to find their own way and taking responsibilities for their own learning (Zare 2012).

**Vocabulary strategies**

Table 4: What I do to memorize new words

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I group the words by type | 11 | 17 | 13 |
| I match the sound of the new words with the sound of a word I know | 16 | 21 | 4 |
| I use rhymes to remember new words | 12 | 20 | 9 |
| I make pictures of new words in my mind | 9 | 23 | 9 |
| I write the new word in a sentence | 21 | 15 | 5 |
| I write the new word on a card | 22 | 5 | 4 |
| I go over new words several times at first | 6 | 10 | 25 |
| Later I go remind myself about words I learned earlier | 28 | 5 | 8 |



OVERALL ANALYSIS FOR VOCABULARY STRATEGIES
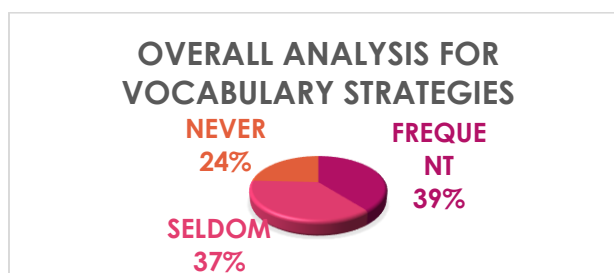NEVER 24%
FREQUENT 39%
SELDOM 37%

Figure 2: Overall analysis for vocabulary strategies

Secondly, is the vocabulary strategies. In this question, students are asked about what they do to memorize new words. Revision and writing new words on a card or in a sentence contribute the highest percentage for strategies frequently employed by the students for memorization. However, repetition is the least strategy preferred by the students as only 15% or 6 out of 41 students practiced it. Figure 2, 39% of the students frequently employ vocabulary strategies and 24% of the students do not prefer vocabulary strategies as their preferable strategies in learning English.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that most of the students rely heavily on memory strategy to memorize new words. The students also prefer to experiment with new words. This shows that the students are not only able to find their own way of memorizing but also creative in enhancing their understanding and memorization of a new word or concept which is a criteria of a good language learner.

## Speaking Skills

Table 5: What I do to practice speaking

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| I make the sound of the language until I can say them well | 17 | 15 | 9 |
| I watch TV shows in the language | 27 | 9 | 5 |
| I go to the movies that use the language | 21 | 14 | 6 |

Table 6 : What I do to talk with other people

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| I start conversations | 12 | 17 | 12 |
| I plan what I am going to do | 23 | 16 | 2 |
| I ask the other person to correct me when I talk | 11 | 23 | 7 |

Table 6 : What I do to talk with other people

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| I ask the person to help me | 34 | 7 | 0 |
| I try to say it a different way | 24 | 12 | 5 |
| I use words from my own language | 16 | 16 | 9 |

## OVERALL ANALYSIS FOR SPEAKING STRATEGIES

NEVER
15%

FREQUENT
49%

SELDOM
36%

Figure 3: Overall analysis of speaking strategies

Based on the Table 5, students were asked about what they do to practice speaking. TV shows and movies were the most preferred medium employed by the students to practice their speaking skills. Both of the media contribute the highest percentage which is 66% for watching TV shows and 51% for movies. On the other hand, in Table 6, 56% or 23 out of 41 students prefer to plan what they are going to speak about beforehand. The data also shows that initiating a conversation is the least thing that they prefer to do where 30% or 12 out of 41 students never start a conversation. Next, all of the students will ask their speaking partners to help them whenever they encounter difficulties in speaking. 59% of the students tried to say it differently and 39% of them resort to their native language to overcome the difficulties.

From Figure 3, 49% of the students frequently employ speaking strategies in learning English while 36% of them seldom applied it and 15% of them prefer not to use speaking strategies to learn the language effectively.

It is not surprising when most of the students prefer not to be actively involved in a conversation as they might feel inferior to others who are more proficient than them. In Table 6, students were asked about how to overcome problems while speaking. Most of the students resort to ask for help from their speaking partners. Only 59% of the students tried to say it differently and 39% of them will use their mother tongue in overcoming problems while speaking the target language.

Based on the findings, it can be derived that most of the students employ social and affective strategies as their preferable speaking strategies. According to Stern (1992), learners may experience various feelings in learning another language. Good language learners are aware of these feelings and try to build positive feelings towards the foreign language and its speakers as well as its learning activities(Zare 2012). Affective domains are crucial in language learning as it involves a variety of personality factors, feelings about ourselves and about others with whom we come into contact with(Brown 2000). Most of the students did not learn English as their second language but as a foreign language. This makes the students feel inferior to use the language as they are afraid of making mistakes which leads to embarrassment. Hence, to overcome this situation, they favour to initiate the conversation by planning on topics in order to build their self-esteem. Once they have gained their self-esteem, students will voluntarily joined conversation with a more intricate and serious topic.

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**Reading Skills**

Table 7: What I do to read more

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I look at pictures and what is under the pictures | 17 | 15 | 9 |
| I read things more than once | 16 | 15 | 10 |
| I underline parts that seem important | 22 | 12 | 7 |
| I mark the reading in different colours to help me understand | 19 | 12 | 10 |

Table 8: What I do to understand what I read

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I read a lot in the language | 20 | 18 | 3 |
| I read for fun in the language | 18 | 12 | 11 |
| I look for things to read that are not too hard | 20 | 13 | 8 |

Table 9 : Strategies to overcome reading difficulties

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I guess the meaning by using clues from other parts of the passage | 11 | 11 | 19 |
| I use a dictionary to find meaning | 19 | 12 | 10 |



Figure 4: Overall analysis for reading strategies

In table 7, students were asked about what they do to read more and the results were quite interesting. 49% or 20 out of 41 students prefer to read English reading materials frequently and in which the articles are not too difficult. Only 18 or 44% of the students read in the target language for fun. Next, students were asked about what they do to understand what they read better which was shown in Table 8. 54% or 22 students tend to underline important parts while reading. 46% prefer mark their reading materials in different colours and 41% of them prefer looking at pictures while reading. Only 39% of the students prefer to read English reading materials more than once. Table 9 shows strategies frequently employed by the students to overcome reading difficulties. For strategies that the students employ in overcoming problems while reading in the language, most of the students prefer to use dictionary to have a better understanding of what they have read. Only 27% or 11 out of 41 students prefer to guess the meaning by using clues from the passage while reading. Figure 4 shows the frequency of using reading strategies to learn the language effectively. 44% of the students prefer to use reading strategies while 24% of them never use reading strategies to become a better English learner.

Based on the result, it can be concluded that students preferably use the cognitive strategies in tackling reading comprehension. Students tend to read a lot which suggests repetitive behaviour to improve their ability to learn or remember the materials. In addition to that, materials with lots of pictures in it, not only enhance their reading skills but also helps them to have in depth understanding of the materials. Students also prefer to underline important facts and rely on pictures to guide them while reading which shows that the students are field independence. According to Brown (2000), field independence is a learning style in which the person has the ability to perceive a particular or relevant item or factor in a 'field' of distracting items. It enables the person to distinguish parts from a whole, to concentrate on something and to analyze separate variables without contamination of neighboring variables(Brown 2000).

**Writing Skills**

Table 10 : What I do to write more

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I take class notes in the language | 18 | 13 | 10 |
| I write other notes in the language | 17 | 16 | 8 |
| I write letter to other people in the language | 20 | 13 | 8 |

Table 11 What I do to write more

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I plan what I am going to write | 27 | 10 | 4 |
| I use a dictionary or glossary | 35 | 6 | 1 |
| I read what I wrote to see if it is good | 27 | 8 | 6 |

Table 12: What I do to write better

| STRATEGY | FREQUENT | SELDOM | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|
| I ask someone for the word or phrase I want to write | 27 | 7 | 7 |
| I try to say it a different way | 14 | 15 | 12 |
| I use words from my own language | 21 | 8 | 2 |



Figure 5: Overall analysis for writing strategies

Based on Table 10, 49% of the students prefer to write letter to other people in order to improve their writing skills. Taking notes in the target language is the least preferred strategy where only 24% of the students never practice it. In order for the students to write better in the target language, the results were quite interesting. Based on table 11, 85% or 35 out of 41 students to use dictionary. Students were equally divided into two strategies which is 60% for planning what to write and another 60% of the students proofread their written word. Last but not the least are the strategies used by students whenever they encounter any problems while writing in the target language. Based on table 12, 66% of the students favour asking for help from their friends while 51% of them favour using words from their own mother tongue. In Figure 5, 56% of the students frequently used writing strategies making this strategy is the most preferable strategies among five strategies involved in this study.

Based on my findings, the students preferably to employ metacognitive strategies to enhance their writing skills and social strategies in helping them to overcome the difficulties in writing. Students prefer to plan beforehand what they are going to write an essay. This shows that the students are aware of their own learning and exploit the most effective method or technique in order to overcome their shortcoming in writing. Besides that, students are matured enough to learn on their own by making self-evaluation by proofreading their essay before submitting it to their teachers. They ask their teachers of friends who are more proficient than them to help them to check errors and suggest ways to improve themselves.

## Implications on teaching and learning

From the findings, there are three major implications can be derived. Firstly, most of the students are audio-visual learners. They prefer to listen and to see in order for them to understand better. As a teacher, I should integrate more English audio-visual media during lesson as it will helps to maximize the input of English among students without neglecting the fun and excitement that these media have to offer.

Secondly. social strategy is the most preferable strategies among students in overcoming their difficulties in language learning. Students voluntarily ask for help from teachers, friends and even strangers for further explanation, clarification and error checking in order to help them to be better in the target language. Hence, it is the teachers' responsibility to find methods or ways in order to expose them to a real life situation where they can utilize their skill maximally. Blog writing, video making and Facebook are among interactive activities that allow the students to write and talk with people around the world can be implemented in class.

Last but not the least, these findings benefit the teachers the most. Through these findings, teachers are able to discover the students' learning styles and strategies which is very crucial for a successful language learning. Teachers also gain some insights on how to tackle students of low proficiency level and at the same time enables the teachers to design activities and lesson plans that suit the students' need and fluency. The students also benefit from this project. Students are becoming autonomous learner by being aware of their own strength and weakness in language learning. They are able to discover the learning styles and strategies that benefits them the most and utilize it to maximize their learning experience.

## CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, this research shows students apply various types of learning strategies in language learning. Hence, it would be wise for teachers to be aware of their students' preference in order to design materials and activities that will cater to the students' needs and proficiency level.

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