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Language Learning Strategies of Successful EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study aimed at exploring language learning strategies applied by successful EFL learners, specifically in learning language elements: vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. This study employed qualitative design, involving three participants identified as successful EFL learners. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and document examinations. Miles and Huberman's model was used as the technique of data analysis. The research findings demonstrated that successful EFL learners in this study employed cognitive, memory, and compensation strategies in learning vocabulary. In learning pronunciation, cognitive and metacognitive strategies were utilized. Meanwhile, in learning grammar, EFL successful learners used cognitive and social strategies. Cognitive strategies were the most frequent strategies used by the participants, while memory, metacognitive, and compensation strategies were the least.

Keywords: learning strategies, EFL learning, language elements

Introduction

The success in learning English as a foreign language is influenced by many factors. Language learning strategies have been identified as one of the pivotal factors. Wenden and Rubin (1987) described learning strategies as any strategies that include sets of operations, steps, plans routines used by the learner to process information effectively starting from obtaining, storage, retrieval, and the uses. Meanwhile, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined it as specific thoughts or behaviors that learners utilize to comprehend, learn, and retain new information. Oxford, on the other hand, highlighted that learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make

learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990b, p.8). Based on these definitions, it can be inferred that learning strategies are of crucial importance. It helps learners to manage and organize their learning to be more effective and enjoyable. Thus, it leads to learning improvement.

Rubin (in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) classified learning strategies into direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies consist of six sub-strategies include clarification or verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, and practice. Indirect learning strategies contain two sub-strategies namely creating opportunities for practice and production tricks. O'Malley and Chamot divided learning strategy into three main categories. Those are metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies. In the process of doing language tasks, metacognitive strategies are involved in terms of selective attention to the task, planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Cognitive strategies, on the other hand, are effectively used to process incoming information. These strategies are broadly explained into several categories such as rehearsal, organization, inferencing, summarizing, deduction, imagery, or using a visual image, transfer, and elaboration process. The last category was affective strategies which are helpful to handle over affective aspects in language learning. This strategy is transferred into three specific actions namely cooperating, questioning for clarification, and self-talk.

A more comprehensive classification of learning strategies was coined by Oxford (1989). Oxford's framework grouped learning strategies into direct and indirect. Direct strategies are strategies involved when learners use the target language. These strategies fall into three subcategories: Memory, Cognitive and Compensation Strategies. Memory strategies refer to specific techniques applied to help learners store and recall new information. These strategies are divided into four sets of techniques, namely creating linkage, applying image, reviewing, and employing actions. Cognitive strategies, on the other hand, are defined as techniques to manipulate and transform the target language in some straight ways. These types of strategy assist learners in comprehending and producing the target language through some actions such as reasoning, analysis, note-taking, functional practices in naturalistic settings, and formal practice with structures and sounds. The last subcategory of direct strategy is compensation strategies that are effectively used to compensate learners' insufficient knowledge of the target language. These strategies include utilizing the context to guess the meaning in listening and reading activities, using synonym and 'talking around' the missing words; and strictly in speaking using gestures or pauses to words (Oxford, 1990b).

Indirect strategies assist and control language learning without directly involving in the target language. They consist of Metacognitive, Affective, and Social Strategies. Metacognitive strategies are defined as "behaviors used for centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating one's learning" (Oxford & Crookall, 1989, p. 404). These strategies help learners to plan, manage, and evaluate their learning. Affective strategy is applied to help learners control affective factors inhibiting language learning such as anxiety, attitude, motivation, self-esteem, and self-confidence. This strategies falls into three types, namely anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and emotional self-awareness. The last subcategory is social strategies. Social strategies encourage learners to learn from others by employing techniques such as asking questions, collaborating, and sharing with others.

The earliest study on learning strategies arrived at the identification of Good Language Learner (GLL). Good language learner term is used interchangeably with successful language learners. Lots of research confirmed the positive relationship between strategies applied and

success in language learning. Green and Oxford (1995) stated that the active use of strategies enables learners to achieve higher proficiency in their language learning. Chang et. al (2007) also highlighted that language learning strategies hold an essential role in the process of learning a second or foreign language since the strategies facilitate acquisition, storage, retrieval, or use of information and increase self-confidence. Since the 1970s, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between GLL's success in language learning and strategies applied. Rubin (1975) found a list of typical strategies of good language learners, such as (1) using clues to guess the meaning, (2) using a variety of techniques to communicate or learn from communication, (3) managing inhibitions, (4) getting concern to form, (5) practicing the language they are trying to learn, (6) monitoring their own and others' speech and (7) focusing on meaning.

The most recent study was conducted by Alamsari (2020) that investigated a good language learner's vocabulary learning strategies in Saudi Arabia context. The findings of this study showed that good language learners employed two types of strategies: metacognitive and cognitive strategies. The former strategy included monitoring and planning, the later strategy comprised of retrieval, avoidance, making associations, and verification. This study also confirmed that the vocabulary learning strategies displayed by the GLL can be utilized to help low-level students to improve their learning.

Al-Kanza'leh (2019) conducted a study exploring preferred language learning strategies for a group of EFL learners at Saqra University, Saudi Arabia. Using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire by Oxford, this study involved 60 male undergraduate students enrolled in the English department. The findings of this study showed that social strategies were used by the students in the highest range followed by metacognitive strategies. Compensation, cognitive, affective strategies were also used in an average range. Meanwhile, memory strategies were also applied in low range.

Mahalingam and Yunus (2016) investigated language learning strategies used by successful learners in a rural primary school in Malaysia. Using a questionnaire, this study involved 30 good language learners from a rural primary school in Sabah. The results of this study indicated that affective strategies were reported as the most frequently used strategies. This study also confirmed that different individual prefers different strategies in their learning. The strategies used also depend on the skill they learned.

Learning strategy uses might vary from student to student even though they are taught by the same teacher and studying in the same class. However, it can be exposed and trained to a wide range of learners to be successful in their learning (Mahalinggam & Yunus, 2016). Most research on successful learners focused on exploring learning strategies in learning language skills and only a few concerned with the use of strategies to learn language elements such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. For those reasons, this present study aimed to explore successful EFL learners' strategies in learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

Methodology

Participants

This study involved three participants identified as successful EFL learners. There were two females and one male. Preliminary interviews and some indicators from document examinations such as objective English standardized test scores (TOEFL and IELTS), writing archival documents, academic records (transcript), and some certificates of achievement were used as the main considerations to select the participants.

Instruments

Primary instruments in this research were interview protocols and field notes. Secondary instruments included a handphone recorder and a camera. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, and document examinations. In-depth interviews were purposed to explore information about participants' learning experiences that lead to their success in language learning. Document examinations were aimed at gathering information about participants' achievements and strategies in learning English especially in learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. The information from the document examination was also used to formulate interview questions related to participants' activities in learning English.

Data analysis

Interactive data analysis methods proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) were used in this research. Three stages of interactive data analysis covered data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data condensation stage, the data was sorted, classified, summarized, and organized to help the researcher focus on the data which is central to the research. After the data was condensed, it was then displayed by using narrative texts. The last step was conclusion drawing and verification. In this stage, the researcher paid attention to irregularities, patterns, explanations, consequences, and possible ways to configure the data. The classification of learning strategies in this study referred to Oxford's framework of learning strategies.

Findings and Discussion

Strategies in learning vocabulary

Various strategies were employed by the participants in this research in learning vocabulary. Cognitive strategies were the most frequently used strategy reported by all participants that include consulting with a dictionary under the specific strategy of *using resources to receive messages*. Applying new vocabulary to write in a diary and social media status was also reported by the participants. These strategies are categorized as cognitive strategies, *placing new words into context* sub-category.

All participants also used *practicing naturalistically* by watching movies and listening to English songs to increase their vocabulary. As stated by Oxford that *Practicing naturalistically* is among the most important strategies in learning a language. This finding corroborates many previous findings that most of the good or successful learners used cognitive strategies more often. It supports Alasmari's (2020) findings that good language learners used cognitive and metacognitive strategies in learning vocabulary. It also supported Oxford's (1990) statement that cognitive strategy is indispensable in learning a new language.

One of the participants in his study used memory strategies to enhance her vocabulary. The participant memorized the list of new words from her teacher. She also tended to memorize all new words she encountered. Oxford (1990b) stated that memory strategies are particularly useful in vocabulary learning as the most sizable and unmanageable component in the learning language.

In addition, all participants utilized compensation strategies to guess the meaning of new words by understanding the context which is under *guessing intelligently* specific strategy. As confirmed by Oxford (1990) that compensation strategies are employed by learners to

compensate learners' inadequate knowledge about the language. The use of compensation strategies corresponds to Rubin's (1975) findings on typical strategies of good language learners, namely using clues to guess the meaning. It is also in line with the characteristics of good language learners as described by Rubin and Thomson (1994) that good language learners are willing to take risks, they make errors work for them not against them (Mahalinggam, 2016, p363). The following table summarized the learners' strategies in learning vocabulary.

Table 1.

Strategies in learning vocabulary

Participants	Specific strategies	Strategy group
Participant 1	Structured reviewing	Memory
	- Memorizing new words	
	Practicing formally/naturalistically	Cognitive
	- watching English movies	
	- listening to English songs	
	- reading English novels, magazines, and proverbs	
	- Writing paragraph/sentences using new words	
	- Learning from exposures of daily instructions	
	Using linguistic clues	Compensation
	- Guessing the meaning from context	
Participant 2	Using resources to receive messages	Cognitive
	- Checking the meaning of new words in a dictionary	
	Using linguistic clues	Compensation
	- Guessing the meaning from context	
Participant 3	Practicing naturalistically	Cognitive
	- watching English movies	
	- listening to English songs	
	- reading proverbs / words from pictures	
	Using resources to receive messages	
	- checking dictionary	

Strategies in learning Pronunciation

The participants utilized cognitive and metacognitive strategies in learning pronunciation. Imitating and repeating how the words pronounced are among cognitive strategies used by the participants. They accessed the exposure of new words and the pronunciations from their teachers/lecturers, friends, and native speakers. They also learned pronunciation by *practicing naturalistically* such as watching English movies and listening to English songs. According to Oxford, strategies for practicing are among the most important cognitive strategies. In addition, one of the participants applied metacognitive strategy, in which she paid attention to the ways the native speaker pronounced English words. Metacognitive strategies supply a way for learners to organize their learning process (Oxford, 1990). Metacognitive strategies consist of two modes: directed attention and selective attention. In this study, the participant employed directed attention by focusing on the way the words were pronounced by the native speaker.

Furthermore, all participants also confirmed that they usually checked dictionaries for phonetic symbols and auditory clues to learn pronunciation. In this case, they preferred to use an

audio-monolingual dictionary to listen to the pronunciation of new words. In addition, they also used linguistic clues by guessing the meaning of new words from the context. The following table illustrates the participants' strategies in learning pronunciation.

Table 2.

Strategies in learning pronunciation

Participant	Specific strategies	Strategy groups
Participant 1	Repeating	Cognitive
	- Repeating teachers', friends' and native speakers' pronunciation	
	Imitating	
	- Imitating native speakers' pronunciations	
Participant 1	Practicing formally/naturalistically	Metacognitive
	- Learning from the lecturer (phonology subject)	
	- watching TV/movies	
	- listening to English songs	
	Paying attention	
- paying attention to how words are pronounced		
Participant 2	Practicing formally / naturalistically	Cognitive
	- learning / listening to teachers (English subject)	
	- watching English movies	
	- Listening to English songs	
	Using resources to receive messages	
- checking dictionary		
Participant 3	Using resources to receive messages	Cognitive
	- checking dictionary	

Strategies in learning grammar

From the result of interviews, it was found that participants in this research learned grammar by using some strategies. All participants applied *reasoning deductively*, the sub-strategy of cognitive strategies. These strategies include studying grammar from grammar books, doing grammar exercises extensively, and analyzing sentence patterns from English texts. They also used *practicing naturalistically* sub-strategy where they acquired grammar knowledge by reading English texts. In addition, one of the participants also employed social strategies namely consulting with her English teacher. This strategy is under *asking questions* sub-strategy. Below is the table that shows the participants' strategies in learning grammar by using Oxford's learning strategies framework.

Table 3.
Strategies in learning grammar

Participants	Specific strategies	Strategy groups
Participant 1	Reasoning deductively - doing grammar exercises - analyzing sentence patterns from English texts. - studying grammar from the grammar books	Cognitive
	Asking questions - consulting (asking) to teacher	Social
Participant 2	Practicing formally / naturalistically - learning from teachers - picking up (acquiring) grammar by reading English texts	Cognitive
Participant 3	Reasoning deductively - studying grammar from the grammar books - doing grammar exercises	Cognitive

Conclusion

Successful EFL learners in this study applied cognitive, memory, and compensation strategies in learning vocabulary. Cognitive strategies were the most frequent strategies used by the participants while memory and compensation strategies were the least. In *practicing naturalistically* sub-strategy of cognitive strategies, the learners utilized some strategies such as watching movies, writing in context, listening to English songs, reading proverbs/words from pictures, reading English novels, and magazines; and accessing exposure of English instructions at home. They also used a monolingual dictionary to learn vocabulary that falls under *using resources to receive messages* a specific strategy of cognitive strategies. Writing in a diary was also reported by participants. This strategy is under *creating mental linkage* sub-strategies. One of the participants in this research *used mechanical techniques* by writing new words on the wall.

In learning pronunciation, the successful EFL learners used cognitive strategies more often than metacognitive strategies. *Practicing, imitating, practicing naturalistically, paying attention,* and *using resources* are the sub-categories of cognitive strategies they employed. They used to repeat their teachers' and their friends' pronunciations of the English words. They also tended to imitate the way the native speakers pronounce English words. In addition, they immersed themselves in any English media such as English movies and songs. Monolingual and audio dictionaries were also used as resources to improve their pronunciations.

In improving their grammar knowledge, successful EFL learners in this study employed cognitive and social strategies. They applied *reasoning deductively* by doing grammar exercises extensively, analyzing sentence patterns in English texts, and studying grammar from grammar books. They also learned grammar from the teachers in the classroom and acquiring grammar knowledge when reading English texts. In addition, they also consulted with teachers when found difficulties in learning grammar. To sum up, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, and social strategies are the effective strategies used by the participants in learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

Participants in this study found many benefits of utilizing various strategies in their learning. The effective strategies made EFL learning more effective. Therefore, it is advisable for EFL

students to equip themselves with various strategies that fit them in learning English. This study also found that the participants in this study learning English by exploring things around them and immersing themselves in language exposure such as English movies, songs, and reading texts. Considering this, the researcher suggested that English teachers can integrate authentic materials such as English songs, English movies, and text messages into pedagogical activities to provide more opportunities for language acquisition. However, since this study only involved three (3) successful learners as the participants, it is suggested that future researchers conduct a deeper investigation on the use of learning strategies of successful EFL learners by involving the greater number of participants.

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