

Successful ESL Learners' Strategy Use for Writing Skills

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Every learner has different ways and strategies in building excellent writing skills. Past researchers have suggested that good second language learners have a greater awareness of the strategies used in their learning. However, there are insufficient studies that focused on successful language learners from lower secondary students. Therefore, this study aimed to seek out the ESL learning strategies used for writing skills by lower secondary students. This study employed a quantitative approach where 15 successful language learners from a public school were involved. Based on the findings, the most important strategies used by successful language learners are reading, producing a draft before writing, and also using a dictionary to acquire vocabulary. This study provides knowledge and understanding of the possible strategies that can be promoted to all second language learners in the future.

Keywords: *English as a Second Language (ESL), successful learners' strategy, writing skills.*

Introduction

In this 21st century, a regular classroom setting is not limited to the teacher's role as the only source of knowledge. There is a gradual move towards the preference of students' autonomy in language learning (Weng et al., 2016). Autonomic learning is a learning style that is related to the concept of freedom from others and interference, where the student is the primary assemblage of learning. Additionally, through reading, listening, study, observation, and practice, the students can experience an increment in knowledge and skills (Zhao & Hu, 2018). The teacher needs to bolster the change from dependence to autonomy by helping students to build up their ability for self-administration. Learner autonomy centres around the student and their utilisation of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills to shape the language learning process. It is known to have an exceptionally incredible effect on the advancement of self-development to language learning (Little et al., 2017).

The idea of language learning strategies (LLS) in second language acquisition (SLA) has been debated since its initiation. All through the 2000s, there was an enduring decrease in language learning strategies in exchange for the use of different concepts such as strategic learning and mentioned autonomic learning (Thomas & Rose, 2018). As researchers and educators have been endeavouring to discover viable teaching strategies and ways to deal with language teaching, Brown, as cited by Thu, noticed that specific students tended to be more successful regardless of strategies or techniques of teaching. Such observation has been the catalyst for researchers to recognise the characteristics or strategies that are utilised by successful language learners (SLLs) (Brown, 2007; Thu, 2009).

The researchers also recognised the need to concentrate on several issues, for example, the utilisation of methodologies, the use of LLS in innovation interceded language learning, the connection among procedures, self-coordinated learning and also autonomy which could all affected the conduction on SLA in ESL settings (Pawlak & Oxford, 2018). The significance of individual variation in language learning has also been taken note. It appears that in expansion to teaching strategies, learning strategies can essentially empower students to accomplish a higher state of achievement in learning another language.

There are a lot of previous researchers that talked about successful language learners (Naiman, 1975; Embi et al., 2001), but not much is known about SLLs in secondary school contexts, especially the lower secondary students. These students are young learners and have less experience in terms of learning English. Inclined heads over mobile phones, tablets, or laptops while fingers were typing into the keyboards; this is a typical picture of the present world and today's environment. These young generations are composing more frequently, and even though their messages may be fragmented or brief (Elola, 2018), the messages sent are also a form of writing exercises for the students. Besides, the competency to utilise another language besides one's first language can be an intriguing and challenging task in language learning and also can be a time-consuming process.

The strategies used by the SLLs can help the lower proficiency ESL students if the plans are being introduced, shared, and taught in classrooms. Hence, we need to identify strategies used by these SLLs from lower secondary school students to seek room for improvement. Therefore, this study is designed to identify the language learning strategies employed by successful language learners, especially in writing skills.

Language Learning Strategies

Many researchers defined the term language learning strategies. Ehrman and Oxford characterised language learning strategies as "approaches or techniques that students use to upgrade their advancement in creating second language skills" (Ehrman and Oxford, 1990). Besides that, learning strategies are characterised as "specific actions, practices, steps, or

techniques" (Oxford, 2003). Some examples in language learning strategies include searching out discussion partners or rewarding oneself for handling a troublesome language assignment.

From these definitions, it is informed that language learning strategies are crucial in language learning, and students need to have their plans to help them master a language. A given technique is neither excellent nor awful; it is impartial until the setting of its utilisation is altogether considered. A strategy is valuable if the accompanying conditions are available: (a) the plan relates well to the task given, (b) the plan fits the specific students' learning style and (c) the students utilise the strategy adequately and join it with another important strategy (Oxford, 2003).

Researchers have proposed various methods for working with language learning strategies. For instance, Oxford (1990) offers an eight-step model to be a part of second language teaching. Furthermore, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) also advocate for the integration of strategy training in teaching through the Intellectual Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). Both of these ideas incorporate direct training of how and when to utilise language learning strategies. Today, strategy training is a vital piece of language teaching (Coyle, 2007; Grenfell, 2007; Halbach, 2000)

The results from research analysis by Dahlberg (2016) also showed that the attributes appointed to learning strategies are similar to those found in the existing literature. Learning strategies are portrayed as objective-oriented actions that are mainly utilised for solving issues, and they can be conscious or unconscious (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Macaro, 2006).

Methods

This study employed a quantitative approach as a research design. The researcher used a questionnaire as an instrument for the study. This questionnaire has six questions that focused on the strategies for improving writing skills. Each answer to the question was to be chosen between 3 Likert scales. The questions were adapted from Young Learners' Language Strategy Use Survey by Cohen and Oxford (2002) as their questions were short and straightforward, and it was suitable for the researcher to employ on the young participants. The population required for this study were students aged 13 years old, which are in Form 1 of the lower secondary level at a secondary school in Selangor, Malaysia. However, the researcher chose only 15 successful language learners from the best class as the research samples. The researcher chose participants who had excellent achievements in their English subjects. The sampling technique used in this research was purposive sampling. The researcher gathered the 15 students in the computer lab and explained the purpose of the survey. Then, they were given 15 minutes to answer the survey. After that, they were

required to go back to their class and resumed lessons per usual. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics using frequency counts.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Writing Skills Strategies

What I do to learn writing in English:	Isn't me (%)	Somewhat like me (%)	Definitely me (%)
1. I use a dictionary to help	13	27	60
2. I use words from my language and translate them into English.	33	33	34
3. I plan what I want to write	7	20	73
4. I ask someone to correct my writing.	20	33	47
5. I read what I wrote to see if it is good.	-	13	87
6. I use digital tools to help (e.g., spell checker, grammar check, etc.)	20	40	40

Based on Table 1, the highest percentage of 87% was received from the strategy of "I read what I wrote to see if it is good." It is the most preferred strategy by successful language learners to learn writing skills. The researcher concluded that reading a lot can help in improving writing skills. Reading a lot can help to add on the writer's reference; from reading, the learner can acquire new knowledge to be included in their writing. Reading also stimulates ideas to write and promotes vast imagination for the learner to imagine before writing. Excellent writing skills' students are frequently known to be frequent readers, so reading habits ought to be imparted at an early age by doing a ton of exercises that advances reading skills (Ien et al., 2017). The successful language learner admitted that reading what they wrote can help them to save a lot of time during the final check as they are correcting their work all along and not waiting until the whole of the writing is done. The successful language learner will read their writing, to check for grammar mistakes, spelling errors before submitting their work. This strategy also requires learners who already have a good foundation in the language to be able to self-check their work. If that learner does not have sufficient competence, he or she would not be able to find out their own mistakes, let alone correct it. Therefore, a language learner must practice reading to produce good writing and also do a self-check from the reading.

Next, the second-highest strategy is planning what to write. The successful language learner reported having a writing structure planned out to avoid repetition of ideas or lack of

information in specific paragraphs. The learner will first plan their main ideas, elaboration, and examples to be included. This finding is also in line with Yunus and Mat (2014); preparing a draft as a strategy can help students to synthesise the writing ideas and helps school students to make and shape their thoughts. It is what is lacking in other students where they simply write what is in their head without having a plan. Skilled writing is challenging, requiring broad self-regulation of a complicated procedure. Students must develop an understanding about the writing procedure, genre, and strategies. (Harris and Graham, 2017). Writing is an adaptable, objective coordinated task that is scaffolded by rich information on the ability to arrange the content and revise it (Harris and Graham, 2009). Successful writers need to be clear about the functions the writing serves and apply useful guidelines through all the processes. Last but not least, a successful writer must own sufficient topic knowledge, motivation, and persistence to create a meaningful and powerful writing end product.

The third highest strategy of 60% is using a dictionary to help the writing process. Successful language learners will use a dictionary to help them acquire certain words. Unsuccessful learners do not always have the dictionary in hand, and they do not bother to look through it. It is the difference between successful language learners, and this strategy proved how dictionary usage, despite an old-school technique, maintained to be useful in learning writing skills. Other than that, the present schools and colleges, educators, faculty, and administrators are expected to satisfy accreditation guidelines in educating and demonstrating fitting digital skills. The students are well-acknowledged and ready to utilise the present advances in learning writing skills (Loague et al., 2018). Thus, exploring useful teaching and learning tools can save time, add to students' accomplishments, and help persuade teachers to become familiar with viable employments of innovation. Besides the use of paper dictionaries in classrooms, electronic dictionaries can also be integrated into language labs or at home. Electronic dictionaries are appealing and fun to be used by ESL students at various levels. The utilisation of electronic dictionaries has continuously been a stable liking to many. This is to ensure that writing exercises in and outside the classes can be encouraged and eased with the help of a suitable technological tool (Zheng & Wang, 2016).

Surprisingly, the lowest percentage, which is 34%, is reported to be the usage of their language by the successful language learner. It is shown that they do not think in their native language; they do not do a translation of words in their heads. Only a few of the successful language learners admitted they did the translation of words to help in writing skills. It proved that students need to think in English to write well. The rules and application in English are different from the students' native languages. If they are translating words from other languages, they will possibly produce many mistakes in their writing. For the other criteria in the survey, it is shown that the strategies are somewhat consistent among the scale. Using digital tools to help in writing (i.e., spell checker, grammar check) is not entirely preferred compared to dictionary usage. It is probably due to the participants who are still young and maybe do not have the competency in a variety of digital tools, thus the preference

towards the dictionary. It might be different if we analyse the undergraduates who are already competent and used to using digital tools in their assignments. However, there are many useful web devices, software, and hardware equipment accessible. Language teachers can introduce the ones that students discover engaging in affecting students' writing skills and set them up for what's to come in the future (Precintha et al., 2019).

Finally, only 47% of successful language learners will ask someone else to correct their writing. It showed how the majority of the students are choosing to have control in their work; therefore, they preferred to conduct self-check. It is probably due to the proficiency level of students where these SLLs are already more advanced than their peers, and they are more knowledgeable in doing their tasks even without guidance from others. However, it is always recommended to practise at least peer feedback when it comes to writing. Peer feedback is useful for students' writing as it animates them to consider the task-explicit procedures and criteria adequately. Students who give peer criticism gain involvement with problem discovery, may turn out to be progressively mindful of making similar issues in writing and may find revision strategies to work with (Patchan and Schunn 2015). Peer feedback incorporates students to take other points of view, contrasting others' work with their own and the absorption of new information, which can be rationally alluded to as reflective information building (Popta et al., 2017). Thus, language teachers ought to advise the SLLs to try out peer feedback and have group collaborations and discussions so that the knowledge can be improved and shared equally.

The discoveries of this research give a better comprehension of the strategy used among lower secondary school students of successful language learners. Successful language learners appeared to know more about the significance of learning English and were applying some sort of measures to encourage their language learning. Some of the strategies may be used unconsciously, and from this survey, the successful language learners realised that what they are doing, are learning strategies. They are reported to utilise a more extensive scope of learning strategies that are sometimes unique and also creative concerning those weaker language learners. To lead students to use those techniques, language teachers need to make an adequate input condition inside and outside the classroom (Ang et al., 2017). The role of a teacher includes generating a new shift in academic strategies utilised at the school, especially those that are hard to achieve. The first significant idea is the change from instructional to participative classes. It would not be powerful to educate similar content with another language but to make students comprehend the control and use in the subject matter. Apart from that, the change to progressively participative classes ought to incorporate teacher-student cooperation and to incite communication through collaborative work (Vázquez & Ellison, 2018).



Conclusion

The successful language students are using many strategies, most of the time, using a combination of a strategy as well to be applied in their learning. The successful language learners also very well understood that specific strategy works only on certain language aspects and situations. The strategies used by the students to improve writing skills include instilling an excellent reading habit, preparing a draft before writing, and also using the dictionary to acquire words. Besides that, this research additionally found that successful language learners utilised less affective strategies, and therefore, the language teachers ought to influence the emotional atmosphere in the classroom. For example, teachers can give compliments or enhancement whenever the students accomplish or show progress. This could help in building up their interest in learning as they feel appreciated that their progress brought meaning. Students can also give a self-reward if they can work past their targets. It could make the students eager and excited in learning, as they know that they will get positive consequences out of their actions and thus contributing to a successful teaching and learning process.

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