EXPLORING THE 21ST CENTURY ESL LEARNING STRATEGIES OF STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA'S HIGHER TECHNICAL INSTITUTE

[1] Faizahani Ab Rahman, [2] Yasir Yahya, [3] Sheikha Majid & [4] Ajhar Ahmad
[1] School of Education, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia
[2] Faculty of Education, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
[3] Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
[4] Universiti Kuala Lumpur-Malaysia France Institute

*Corresponding author: *faizahani@uum.edu.my*

ABSTRACT

This research was conducted at a private technical institute of higher learning to explore the different 21st century language learning strategies used by proficient and low proficient ESL learners. In conducting the study, the range of language learning strategies was identified and the frequency of these strategies were recorded. This research determines the choice of in and out of class language learning strategies of learners by the different language performance and academic background of their parents. Using questionnaire adopted from various researchers, 241 respondents who were students of the second, third, fourth or fifth semester from a private technical institute

who have just completed the course were used and then analysed using SPSS.   The research findings reveal that there were 7 dimensions of the 21st century language learning strategies showing high correlation at p=0.05. The dimension which recorded the strongest correlation with strategy is to get online assistance at 0.962. The findings with 10 highly proficient and 10 low proficient learners indicated there are 46 language learning strategies with 22 strategies being frequently used by the more proficient language learners.

Keywords: 21st century, language learning strategies, ESL, technical college, language performance and parents' academic background.

INTRODUCTION

Advances have been made in research pertaining to language learning especially those in second and foreign language. Past research varied in their nature and focus; on learners, teachers, methodologies, and the conditions and processes involved in escalating language learning, especially in second and foreign language. In the last decade, research have been on methodologies, learners and the learning conditions. Investigations in the last decades have been focusing on not only what is language learning but also how a language is learnt. With the emergence of 21st century, language instructors and research have now been engaged in looking at language skills and 21st century skills that are required for students in this century. This leads to research related to language learning strategies and 21st century skills for second language learners such as this.

Investigations and extensive research have been emphasizing not only what is language learning, but also how a language is learnt. With the growing number of studies on these two fields, researchers have identified several factors that contribute to mastering of the second language. These two factors are characteristics and styles of the learners and how a language is learnt. The growing number of studies on the two fields has led the researcher to identify several factors that contribute to mastering of the target language. These factors are the learners and the learning processes.   In the turn of the 21st century, learning strategies have now been linked to the needs of acquiring 21st century skills that focus on skills and knowledge

for competencies and success and mainly on engaging people and organizations at all levels. These skills that require students to be competitive, challenging and employable would extend to creativity, critical thinking, leadership, entrepreneurialism, apart from language skills, amongst others. Curry, , Mynard, Noguchi, & Watkins (2017), Ab Rahman, Saidin, Mohamed, Nasir, (2019), in their study, for instance concluded that communication skill is one of the highly regarded essential employability skill for the 21st century. Here, under communication skills, language proficiency and negotiation skills were mentioned as highly seek after 21st century skills for job opportunities and employment.

Apart from that, the choice of language learning strategies and the 21st century skills that employed by students at various levels of education; be it primary, secondary and tertiary would also be closely related to their surrounding and the environment they live in. At home, this is very much influenced by what their parents can offer, their parents' perceptions of education and undeniably, the parents academic backgrounds. For more affluent families, the types of resources, support and opportunities available could and would be different than other children who do not come from such privilege background.

Parallel to the trend where students' performance and achievements are highly linked to learners' attitude, motivation, aptitude and the learning processes such as previous second language experience and length of exposure to the language, there is an increasing need to study on individual learners' differences. This addresses the prompt to conduct this research if the 21st century language learning strategies utilized by highly and low proficient learners are related to their parents' academic background.

This paper explores on the choice of in and out of class language learning strategies of learners by the different language performance and academic background of their parents. Thus, it answers the following questions:
1.   What are the 21st century second language learning strategies employed by high and low proficiency learners at a higher technical institute?
2.   What are the 21st second language learning strategies employed by learners of parents of different academic background?

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the conundrums of second language research is the learners' strategies employed by both high and low proficiency language learners. For years, language educators and researchers have been confronted by issues of language learning strategies (LLS) and a number of extensive studies have been carried out with expectations that they would be able to unfold the actual processes involved in learning a language. Earlier studies spearheaded by Oxford in the 90s were normally conducted in either a second or foreign language such Mohamed Amin Embi in the context of Malaysia which is where English is taught as second language and most importantly intertwine used as a foreign and second language, which is known as mixed setting.

Chamot (1989) defines language learning strategies as techniques which students use to comprehend, store and remember new information and skills. Here, Chamot uses the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learning that concentrate on planning, monitoring and manipulating the materials. Meanwhile, Hismonoglu (2000) explains that learning strategies are "intentional behaviour and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to help them understand, learn or remember new information." Here, strategies are further viewed as physical and mental that are consciously employed by learners in developing competence in the target language. In parallel to the definition of learning strategies proposed Wenden and Rubin (1987), they have interpreted the term learning strategies as "strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly." Concurrently, Oxford (1990) has undertaken an expansion of the term by explaining that learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations." This term places the importance of acquiring a new language as a task that requires the learners to take control of and thus self-acting on the task given.

21st Language Learning Strategies

Earlier studies on language learning strategies in the 70s show the tendency to simply listing down the characteristics of good language

learners. Led by researchers such as O'Malley and Chamot (1985), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), Ehrman and Oxford (1989) in the 80s, the trend has shifted to the classification of these strategies. The classification began with just 3; but later expanded into 6; cognitive, memory, compensation (direct strategies) and metacognitive, social and affective strategies (indirect strategies) as proposed by Oxford (1990). Meanwhile, in the 80s, researchers began to look into the variables that could contribute to the choice and type of strategies employed. Using these studies as its foundation, the later studies have proceeded designing LLS training for the use of both learners and teachers (see Oxford, 1990, Wenden 1987, 1991; O'Malley 1987; Pemberton, 1996).

Albaili (1997) and Kang (1997) that investigated language learners in the first and second language settings and found that students who were noticed to use more learning and study strategies tend to be more successful in learning. Their study also confirmed that good language learners tend to use more advanced strategies and more frequently that those who are weaker. Radha Nambiar (1998) examine the strategies used for certain language activities and found that there are certain strategies used for certain language activities. Meanwhile, Hoang (1999) studies students in foreign language setting and discovered that Vietnamese students are more inclined to use metacognitivite strategies and least preferred to use social affective strategies.

In the 21st century, language students tend to use combination of language strategies with 21st century skills. Very often, knowing what is needed to be employed would reflect the kinds of language proficiency they would need to acquire. This leads to students focusing on certain skills such as communication, problem solving and critical thinking that they would benefit them most at workplace. Through activities and tasks given in language classrooms, lecturers could inculcate these skills. Research by Ab Rahman et al (2019) collaborated this and mentioned that at present, employers tend to value and appreciate employees who are skilled and proficient in English language, and have other attributes such as digital, teamwork, critical thinking and problem solving.

Other research on employability have also noted this trend among fresh graduates, especially. It has been concluded that fresh graduates

may have the competency but are lacking in many skills, attributes and personality. This seems to be echoed by many others around the globe, making it a worldwide issue for many employers. All of these seem to suggest that students; despite being from secondary or tertiary levels need to pay attention and start using strategies in their language learning so that the skills they acquire would suit and prepare them to work in the work market.

Factors Affecting Language Learning Strategies

Extensive research has associated LLS to factors that could influence on the choices of strategies by language learners. Started in the 80s, some of the factors have been the language being learned, proficiency level, gender, motivation level and national origin. There are many other variables that have been noted to affect on the learning strategy choice, for instance, ethnic differences, class size and the extent of learners' reported use of English out of class (Oxford and Crookall, 1989; Politzer and McGroarty 1985; M. Amin Embi, 1996 and Ab. Rahman (2002). These variables; be it either social or situational are relevant to the Malaysian context and can be used in setting such as in a technical institute like Malaysian France Institute.

Rost and Ross (1991) found that motivation is the most important of the learner variables. It was found that the more motivated students seem to be using more strategies, and that willingness and unwillingness that derives from motivation, attributes, anxiety and personality will also affect on students employing certain strategies. Before a learner can make any decision to use a strategy, one must first possess the need to use the strategy.

In the present study, one of the variables that will be used to correlate with the students LLS is the socioeconomic status of the family. What is predicted in here is that majority of students of middle socioeconomic are more proficient and perform better in English and thus have better in English and thus have better grades than that from students of lower socioeconomic status. Parents who are from higher socioeconomic status are often those who at least graduated from universities and therefore have higher income salary than those who graduated with secondary school certificates. To date, there are very few studies that have conducted on the socioeconomic states factor. There are only a

handful of scholars like Banya and Cheng (1997) who have studied on the socioeconomic status variable found in a study on Middle-East learners, learners who come from the rich families were noted to have mastery of English. He found that these children of the rich who by far have much exposure and bigger access to the target language have higher chances of mastering the target language. Yang (2007) observes that these children are usually sent for private tuition in the foreign language and frequently travel abroad thus giving them the opportunity to use the target language in the real context.

METHODS

The research adopted both descriptive and inferential survey of correlational method. Variables such as the profiles of the respondents were presented in descriptive form whilst the patterns of variation in learners' overall reported strategy use by both high and low proficiency learners in and out of class will use ANOVA analysis. Meanwhile, MANOVA analysis was used to analyse the variance for a quantitative dependent variable by independent variable.

Data obtained from quantitative approach is uniform and easy to be presented (Patton, 2002). As it emphasizes on measurement and correlation or relationship between variables, it is aptly suited for this study as it tries to explore the relationship between the independent variable, parents academic level and the use of 21st century in-class and out of class language learning strategies.

Subjects

The target population for this study comprised of students from a technical institute in Klang Valley. There were close to 600 students at the institute who were completing their diploma in 6 different engineering and technical programmes.   The age of the 241 subjects range from 18 to 21 years old and majority of them were high school leavers with Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysia Certificate of Education), graduates from MARA technical institutions (IKIM) or other institutes like polytechnics, matriculation colleges or National Youth Institutes. The respondents who were taking the diplomas had minimal exposure to the target language; that is English. Therefore,

most of these students can be assumed as having poor proficiency level of the English language.

This is a case study that focuses on language learners in a higher technical institute. Although there were close to 900 students, the study specifically chosen respondents only from three semesters; those are either in semester 2, 3 or 4 since they have taken the Intensive English Grammar course at Malaysia France Institute in their first semester. Students from semester 5 and 6 were excluded since they were preparing for their final year projects.

Research Instrument

Questionnaire was used to investigate the LLS use in and out of the class by the students from the technical institute who had taken the Intensive Grammar Course.

Self-Reported Questionnaire

This study utilized questionnaire which was adapted from Mohamed Amin Embi (1996), Weinstein et all (1984), LASSI (Learing and Study Strategy Inventory) and Oxford's SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) was the chosen mean to investigate the range and variation in the reported in-class and out of class strategies use by high and low proficiency learners in the selected course. The closed items in the questionnaire were mostly adopted from Mohamed Amin Embi's (1996, 2000) with the additional items by Politzer (1983), Oxford (1989), Reiss (1985) and Abdallah (2002).

There were 3 parts in the language learning strategies questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire is constructed to establish the background and profile of the respondents. It consists of factors and variables that may influence the learners' choice of using certain LLS on various language learning tasks and their achievement in learning English. Here, learners were required to answer 20 questions that are relevant to the scope of this study like their families spending and earning in a household, the level of parents education and the frequency and extent of the use of English as a medium of communication at home and their grades for the Intensive English Grammar course. Their grades are based on 3 assignments which were converted to

50% of the total course mark whilst the other 50% is from the final examination. To proceed to the second English language course, students need not pass but by soling more than 6 credit hours will result in students not getting their diplomas.

The second and third part of the questionnaire are on the variables that influence the learners achievement in learning English. Their self-rating comprises of 70 items with 1-4 Likert Scale. The 70 items were further divided into 2 parts, where Part B applies to the strategies involved in learning of English in the classroom and Part C focuses on the strategies employed when learning English out of the classroom environment. Part B encompasses 25 items describing the ways learners learn the Intensive Grammar course in the classroom, while Part C, refers to 45 items of how students learn English outside of the classroom. 4-point Likert scale was chosen instead of 5, apart from to make it easier for the researcher to calculate and tabulate the data, it is also to help eliminate all the vagueness and unclear conclusion on the strategies that learners employ in and out of class.

Data from this questionnaire was analyse using descriptive and inferential statistics where reliability, frequency and descriptive analysis were done. To determine the patterns of variation in learners' overall reported strategy use by both successful and unsuccessful learners and in and out of class strategies, ANOVA analysis was carried out and finally MANOVA analysis was used to analyse the correlation coefficient for independent variable, parents 'academic level and dependent variable, which was their grade in the English language course.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents' Profile

The findings showed that majority of the respondents have parents who are only school leavers or those who graduated with Diploma. 74.4% of families in this study, have either parent or parents who had only completed minimal educational qualification whilst only 23.6 percent come from those parents who have master or degree qualification from universities. This illustrates that majority of the

students have parents whose academic background are minimal, which is high school certificates and only quarter of the sample has parents who obtained university's qualifications. Apart from that, it was also reported that 25.5 percent of the sample speaks English at home while the other 74.3 percent of the population sample does not speak English at home with any of their parents, siblings or relatives. Out of the 25.5 percent who claimed that they use English at home, 12.5 per cent claimed that they speak English often and quite often at home.

In terms of the students grades obtained in the Intensive Grammar Course, around 24.1% managed to obtain Grade F, D and lower C, while 42.3% got Medium C and low C and around 33.6 % got B to A-, which is considered as high achievers.

Variation in Learners' Reported Strategy Use

ANOVA was used to compare the means of various independent variables which are grades obtained for the course and the academic level of the parents. Various calculated score for means of each category of learners with the 7 dimensions show different significance for the many categories. The students language performance was correlated with the variations in learners' reported use of strategy with significant level set at p=0.005 showed all dimensions recorded significant levels below than 0.05 except before classes strategies. This indicates that the use of 6 dimensions (during classes, using media and online resources, getting assistance, using authentic situations, dealing with new words, cultural aspects and concepts, finding ways to motivate) were strongly related to learners' language performance. The findings suggested that high proficiency learners use more and wider strategy than both the medium and low proficiency learners in the way they learn the English subject. It is found that all 6 dimensions except for preparation before classes had significant relationships between the learners' strategy and their language learning success. On the same note, it also marks a similar pattern to other research such as Ajhar Ahmad (2017) where high proficiency learners were reported to use almost all and more frequently all of the listed strategies in the entire 7 dimensions compared to the two other types of language learners. Learners with parents who obtained higher academic qualifications tend to use more of outside class

strategies than those who are low proficiencies. They tend to use and find more opportunities to communicate and use the language in the contents of their social media accounts. They also reported to spend a lot of time outside the class playing online games, browsing English medium websites, watch online channels, meaning they are more exposed than learners whose parents have minimal academic qualifications. Although it was reported that high proficient learners come either from parents who have qualifications from colleges and universities, they are highly linked to using a lot of online websites (outside of class strategies), and seek assistance in class using also online websites (in class strategies).

Meanwhile, when correlated with parents academic level, ANOVA scores for all the 7 dimensions show there were differences between parents with medium and low academic background and with the strategies except for during class strategies. Besides, there was high significance in getting assistance and finding ways to motivate, reportedly at 0.000 and 0.037. Interestingly, the figures also suggested that learners whose parents have very minimal academic level do not mean that they do not use any of these strategies often. It merely indicated that the learners used fewer number of strategies and did not use frequent enough to help them perform better academically. This concluded that regardless of the academic level and background of their parents, learners were still reported to use some of these strategies.

Table 1 illustrates language learning strategies as correlated with the academic background of the parents where getting outside assistance, especially from others and resources scored the highest observed power. This illustrates the learners who come from medium and high parents' academic background use these strategies of this dimension frequently. It can be regarded that parents who are better academically will be more concern of the children's education. Apart from this, the parents also demonstrate that education is important to secure employment and get better paid jobs. Therefore their children were urged to be good learners. Learners of medium and high parents' academic levels were also noticed to seek help from not only their counterparts, lecturers, others around them and other additional resources. One apparent finding was highly proficient learners were reported to use online resources such as language websites, online

dictionaries, online tutorials such as Youtube channels to improve on their language and communication skills.

Finding ways to motivate oneself is at 0.684 observed power, followed by using English media and online resources at 0.628, using authentic situations at 0.620, dealing with new words, concepts and cultural aspects at 0.328, during class strategies at 0.283 and finally preparation before classes at 0.196. This means, finding ways to motivate oneself and using English online resources show strong relationship power with the academic background of these learners' parents. The reason could simply be because this kind of learners have more exposure, therefore they are more well aware of some of the strategies that they can use to become better learners.

Table 1

Individual Dimensions Exhibiting Significant Variations by The Level of Parents; Academic Background

Strategy Item by Dimensions	Observed Power
1.Getting outside assistance (online)	0.962
2.Finding ways to motivate oneself	0.684
3.Using English online resources	0.628
4.Using authentic situations	0.628
5.Dealing with new words, concepts and cultural aspects	0.620
6.During classes	0.283
7.Preparations before classes	0.196

In the next analysis, MANOVA was applied to test the significance of the choice of language learning strategies used with the academic background of the students' parents. Table 2 below illustrates that those students with parents having medium academic background seems to have the most significant difference as compared to the ones with parents of low academic background. It is found that there is a significant difference between the two variables. This explains the choices of strategies employed by learners whose parents have different academic backgrounds.

Table 2

Manova Analysis Showing the Comparison of Language Learning Strategies with Academic Background of the Students' Parents

	Wilks Lambda Value	F value	Within Group	Btwn Group	Signifi Value
LLS	0.935	7.273	3	316	0.000
Med Academic Background	0.960	4.434	3	316	0.005
Low Academic Background	0.997	0.367	3	316	0.777

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Based on the responses gained from the questionnaire, there were seventy 21st century language learning strategies used by learners. The seventy reported strategies are placed in 7 dimensions, which were preparation before class, strategies during classes, using English media, getting outside assistance, using dictionary and other resources from internet, using authentic situations and finding ways to motivate oneself. From the questionnaire, it was reported that most students use strategies during class by paying attention, with 2.97 mean score, followed by using English media and other online resources, social media and websites ranked second with mean of 2.94 and using dictionary and other sources from the internet ranked third with mean 2.84. The least employed strategy used was preparation before class, which is to develop interest in the course with mean score of 2.72.

The 14 strategies which are listed under during class dimension were most commonly used as they were found to be easier to use as they require minimal effort on the part of the learner. Take for instance, sitting near someone who is good in English, paying attention and asking questions and participating in discussions and collaborating with others. These are strategies that are considered as initiatives, as suggested by Mohamed Amin Embi (1996, pg. 257), "the other main attribute of success in language learning seems to be related to learners taking charge of their own learning and becoming autonomous learners.

Variation in Learners' Strategy Use by Academic Level of the Parents

Mohamed Amin Embi (1996, 2007) mentions that students can be encouraged to get part of the classwork checked by their parents or siblings (provided they have got a fairly sound knowledge of English) before handing it over to their teacher. This is echoed by the other LLS researchers such as

ANOVA result implies significant variation in learners 'overall reported strategy by use according to the academic level of the parents (except for during classes strategy). There is a distinctive difference between the reported strategy use by learners and the academic level of their parents. Meanwhile, by item, ANOVA result shows that getting outside assistance strategies has the highest strength of relation with the academic level of the learners' parents. The result indicates that learners whose parents are slightly academically better off than the other learners tend to seek outside assistance more often than other learners. MANOVA result shows significant variation in learners' reported strategy according to their parents' academic level. The result implies that there is a marked difference between the learners reported strategy and the academic level of their parents.

Parental Help on Language Learning Strategies

One of the main attributes associated with successful language learning is with the help of the parents. In this paper, a high percentage of successful learners reported to come from families whose parents have some extended form of education, which means they either have a degree, diploma or a certificate apart from the ones received during secondary schools. Due to this, lecturers should realize the potential of parental input in the learners' language learning. The lecturers can get involvement and cooperation from parents who can help and encourage learners (not necessarily only with their children) to get better grades in their language classes. Lecturers could invite speakers who are also the learners' parents to explain to the students the reasons for them to be proficient in the English language. Apart from this, lecturers could also hold workshops and intensive English classes after and outside the class hours and even during semester break with the help of the parents.

This study illustrates that with high proficiency learners, outside assistance will their best and most frequently used strategy apart from the invaluable help and support from parents that come either in the form of materials, moral support. Apart from that, learners whose parents have higher academic background also reportedly better academically as they get encouragement and assistance. The 21st century language learning strategies centred on learners finding and relying on resources to help them perform better in classrooms. Traditionally, language learners would utilize references from library, assistance from friends and lecturers, but the turn of the century with the emergence of internet, references and assistance come in the form of online. This study has illustrated that with proper guidance and planning, language learners can perform better academically.

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