

# ESL Students' Learning Strategies for the Improvement of their Language Skills

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received: 03/03/2022

Revised: 16/04/2022

Accepted: 17/04/2022

### Keywords:

Metacognitive, cognitive, language strategies,

## ABSTRACT

Effective language strategies contribute to learners' success in learning English. In relation to this, this study aims at investigating ESL students' strategies in learning a language. Those strategies are metacognitive strategies, deep cognitive strategies, and surface cognitive strategies. 50 English department students participated in a survey that required them to reflect on their own learning strategies for the four language skills by answering 80 questions. The result of the study suggests that the metacognitive strategies are the most highly used to improve their language skills compared to the deep cognitive and surface cognitive strategies that are moderately used. The data also showed those strategies are widely used in written texts instead of spoken texts.

## I. Introduction

Language learning strategies contribute to successful language learning whether subconscious or conscious [1]. Some major studies were conducted to elaborate on Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and to suggest different ways of classifying the strategies [2]–[8]

[2] suggests some characteristics of effective LLS which are being a willing and accurate guesser, having a strong drive to communicate, being willing to make mistakes, looking constantly for patterns in the language, practicing, monitoring his/her own and the speech of others, and attending to meaning. [4] reveals that social strategies and cognitive strategies are effective for second language acquisition. [3] list five effective language learners strategies; the active task approach, the realization of language as a system, the realization of language as a means of communication and interaction, management of affective demands, and monitoring of L2 performance. [5] did an experimental study between learning behavior and gain scores. The finding showed there is only a positive significant relationship between social strategies and gain scores. In another study, [8] proposed two broad categories of LLS which are cognitive strategy and metacognitive strategy. [6] suggest more productive classification of LLS has been proposed than the previous ones. O'Malley and Chamot's study consider psychological issues in their taxonomy. They classify the LLS into three categories, namely: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social strategies. [7] proposed six categories: cognitive strategy, memory, compensation, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. The Oxford's language learning questionnaire is called Strategy Inventory for language learning (SILL).

Table 1. Oxford's model of LLS [9]

Strategy group	Strategies	Activities
Direct strategies	Memory strategies	Creating mental images Applying images and sounds Reviewing well
	Cognitive strategies	Practicing Receiving and sending messages Analyzing and reasoning

		Creating structure for input and output Compensation
	Compensation strategies	Guessing intelligently
		Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing Metacognitive
Indirect strategies	Metacognitive strategies	Centering the learning
		Arranging and planning for learning
		Evaluating the learning process
	Affective strategies	Affective
		Lowering anxiety
		Encouraging oneself
		Taking one's emotional temperature
	Social strategies	Asking questions
		Cooperating with others
		Empathising with others

A number of studies have been conducted to find out the relationship between language learning strategies and language performances, and suggest different perspectives on EFL classroom [10]–[13]. However, there isn't a lot of research that looks at the roles of strategies for learning a language in relation to each language skill separately. This new study supports some of what was found in earlier research about how learners' learning strategies are linked to each language skill.

[2] defines LLS as behaviors, steps, and techniques of language learners to improve their learning. Strategic learners know how they think and how they learn. They organize and use a certain set of skills to learn content or do other tasks more effectively and efficiently in school and outside of school. They have a good idea of what a task is about and know how to put together the strategies that work best for the task and for how they learn effectively [6].

[8] distinguishes three types of strategies that directly and indirectly contribute to learning. These strategies are learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. Of learning strategies, there are two strategies that contribute directly to the development of the learner's language system [1]. These are metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies where cognitive strategies comprise deep level and surface level strategies. Cognitive strategies pertain to the behaviors of selecting, obtaining, constructing, and integrating information involved in the acquisition of language during the learning process. These techniques may be subdivided into the following five sub-strategies: a technique for rehearsal, elaboration procedures, organizing tactics, techniques for understanding or critical thinking, and internet skills. Metacognitive techniques require learners to monitor their cognitive processes. This comprises learning preparation and planning, as well as monitoring and assessing the learning process. These metacognitive methods consist of seven sub-strategies: self-regulation strategies, time management strategies, goal-setting strategies, self-monitoring strategies, self-evaluation strategies, concentration strategies, and self-awareness strategies.

## II. Research method

This study surveyed 50 out of 150 English students of Muhammadiyah University of Mataram. The participants are recruited from various semesters of the English Department. They are randomly selected to fill out the questionnaire that consists of 80 questions divided into 3 main categories; metacognitive strategies, surface cognitive strategies, and deep cognitive strategies. The representation of males and females was broadly similar (55% and 45%, respectively). The questionnaire is adopted from Setiyadi's Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire (LLSQ) [1]. The student participating in this study will be required to self-assess their language learning strategies in listening, speaking, reading, and writing using a scale of 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost true). The research instrument was distributed online using google form. The completion of the questions are approximately 30-40 minutes.

Table 2. Setiyadi's Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire [1]

Learning strategies in Speaking	
1.	I use rhymes to remember new English words.
2.	I try to remember new English words by pronouncing them.

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3. I speak a word or a sentence several times to remember it.
  4. I try to learn a new pattern by making a sentence orally.
  5. I try to translate Indonesian sentences into English sentences and produce them orally.
  6. I try to remember what the English word equivalent to Indonesian word is.
  7. I tape record the sentences I produce.
  8. I mix Indonesian words and English words if I do not know the English words.
  8. I put words into rules that I know in speaking.
  9. Before I respond orally to questions, I write out the answers.
  10. I try to correct my mistakes that I produce orally.
  11. I try to speak with myself to improve my speaking.
  12. I try to evaluate my utterances after speaking.
  13. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.
  14. I prepare a topic or grammatical rules in speaking practice.
  15. I ask somebody to correct me when I talk.
  16. I practice speaking with my friends or my teachers.
  17. I practice English with native speakers.
  18. I ask questions in English.
  19. If I cannot think during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
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#### **Learning strategies in Listening**

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1. I try to guess what somebody is saying by using grammatical rules.
  2. I learn English by watching English TV programs.
  3. I learn English by listening to English songs or other listening scripts.
  4. I try to understand what somebody is saying by translating it into Indonesian.
  5. I draw an image or picture of the word in order to remember the word.
  6. I connect the pronunciation of the word with the Indonesian word which has a similar sound.
  7. I concentrate on grammar rather than on communication.
  8. I try to understand the idea by referring to previous experiences I have had.
  9. I try to guess by using a word (s) that is familiar to me.
  10. In Listening, I take notes to remember ideas.
  11. I try to understand every individual word to understand the passage
  12. I listen to what I say to practice my listening skill.
  13. Before practicing my listening skill, I prepare a topic, pronunciation or grammatical rules which give me the greatest trouble.
  14. I try to remember a sentence(s) spoken face-to-face or on cassettes and analyze them by myself.
  15. After a listening practice, I check and recheck my understanding.
  16. I correct the mistakes that I produce orally.
  17. I try to be aware of which sounds give the greatest trouble. In this way, I can pay special attention to them while I listen and practice.
  18. If I cannot understand what somebody is saying, I ask him/her to slow down or say it again.
  19. Listening to what somebody is saying improves my listening skill.
  20. In a group discussion, my listening skill improved.
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#### **Learning strategies in Reading**

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1. To understand unfamiliar English words while I am reading, I guess from available clues.
  2. I learn English by reading English books or magazines.
  3. I connect the spellings of English words with similar Indonesian words to understand the meanings.
  4. I try to understand sentences by analyzing their patterns.
  5. I try to translate word for word.
  6. I try to understand the passage by using my general knowledge and experience.
  7. I use the key words to understand the whole ideas.
  8. I read the passage aloud.
  9. I take notes to remember the ideas.
  10. While I read a text, I try to anticipate the story line.
  11. I read a text more for ideas than words.
  12. I correct my mistakes by rereading the text.
  13. I choose a topic or certain materials for my practice.
  14. I check and recheck my understanding after reading a passage.
  15. If I cannot understand a reading passage, I try to analyze what difficulty I actually have.
  16. In reading, I pick out key words and repeat them to myself.
  17. I try to be aware of which words or grammar rules give me the greatest trouble. In this way I can pay special attention to them while I read and practice.
  18. I discuss reading passages with my friends.
  19. If I do not understand the content of a reading passage, I ask my friends or my teachers for help.
  20. I improve my reading skill by reading letters from my friends
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#### **Learning strategies in Writing**

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1. If I do not know how to express my ideas in English while writing, I keep writing using certain rules that I know.
  2. I write what I am thinking about.
  3. keep a diary.
  4. I try to remember the meanings of words or the patterns by writing them
  5. I write sentences to apply certain rules.
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6. I try to translate word for word.
7. I mix Indonesian words and English words in writing.
8. I write the main ideas first as a guideline.
9. I use Indonesian words if I do not know the English words.
10. I use Indonesian patterns to keep writing in English.
11. I consult a dictionary to find out the meanings of words.
12. I write out new material over and over.
13. I try to memorize the meanings of words.
14. I rewrite my composition by correcting the mistakes that I notice.
15. choose a topic to improve my writing skill.
16. I read my writing and correct the mistakes.
17. I try to be aware of which words or grammar rules give the greatest trouble, this way I can pay special attention to them while I write and practice.
18. I write a message to my friends in English for practice.
19. I write letters in English to my friends.
20. I ask my friends or my teachers to correct my writing.

The data then were analyzed statistically on a computer. Descriptive statistic was reported to understand the students' language learning strategies. Average 5-point Likert scale scores of 3.5-5.0 were defined as high use; average scores of 2.5-3.4 were defined as medium use; average scores of 1.0 and 2.4 were characterized as low use.

### III. Finding and discussion

Table 3 shows the language learning strategies used by the English students of Muhammadiyah University of Mataram. Those strategies are metacognitive strategies, surface cognitive strategies, and deep cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies involve self-direction, self-monitoring, self-evaluating, and self-correcting [6], [8], [14]. The students used deep cognitive strategies to understand, synthesize, analyze texts and apply rules [1]. In contrast, the surface cognitive strategies include the lowest cognitive processes such as recalling knowledge in Bloom's taxonomy.

Table 3. The language learning strategies used by the participants

LLS	Language skills				mean score
	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	
Metacognitive	3,5	3,5	3,6	3,7	3,575
Surface Cognitive	3,5	3,3	3,5	3,6	3,475
Deep Cognitive	3,4	3,4	3,4	3,6	3,45

Based on the Table 3, The metacognitive strategies are the most highly used by the students whereas the surface cognitive and the deep cognitive strategies are used moderately. This finding is supported by Dini's study that she found in her study the metacognitive strategies are highly used by the students, while the cognitive strategies are medium use. The English students use most widely metacognitive strategies in learning written texts both reading and writing, instead of the spoken texts. For example, the students have sufficient time to rewrite the composition by correcting mistakes that they notice and pay attention to the most difficult grammar they encountered.

The metacognitive strategies involve in different language skill areas. In speaking skills, those strategies are (a) *I try to correct my mistakes that I produce orally*, (b) *I try to speak with myself to improve speaking*, (c) *I try to evaluate my utterances after speaking*, (d) *I notice my English mistakes, and use that information to help do better*. The metacognitive strategies of listening are (a) *I listen to what I say to practice my listening*, (b) *I try to remember a sentence(s) spoken face-to-face or on cassettes and analyze it by myself*, (c) *after a listening practice, I check and recheck my understanding*, (d) *I correct the mistakes that I produce orally and* (e) *I try to be aware of which sounds give the greatest trouble. In this way I can pay special attention to them while I listen and practice*. In reading, the strategies under the metacognitive category are (a) *I check and recheck my understanding after reading a passage* (b) *I cannot understand a reading passage, I try to analyze what difficulty I actually have*, (c) *I try to be aware of which words or grammar rules give me the greatest trouble. In*

*this way I can pay special attention to the words or rules while I read and practice. The metacognitive strategies of writing are (a) I rewrite my composition by correcting the mistakes that I notice, (b) I read my writing and correct the mistakes, (c) I try to be aware of which words or grammar rules give the greatest trouble.*

The activities included as deep-level cognitive strategies are differently used in the four skills. In speaking, those strategies are (a) *I use rhymes to remember new English words, (b) I try to remember new English words by pronouncing them, (c) I speak a word or a sentence several times to remember it, (d) I try to translate Indonesian sentences into English sentences and produce them orally.* In listening activity, the strategies include (a) *I learn English by watching English TV programs, and (b) I learn English by listening to English songs or other listening script.* In reading, the deep level cognitive strategies by involving more mental processes. The deep level strategies in reading are (a) *To understand unfamiliar English words while I am reading, I guess from available clues, (b) I learn English by reading English books or magazines, (c) I try to understand sentences by analyzing their patterns, (d) I try to understand the passage by using my general knowledge and experience, (e) while I read a text, I try to anticipate the storyline, and (f) I read a text more for ideas than words.* In writing, the deep level cognitive category includes (a) *I write what I am thinking about, (b) I keep a diary, (c) I write sentences to apply certain rules, (d) I write out new material over and over, (e) I try to memorize the meanings of words, and (f) I write a message to my friends in English for practice.*

The surface-level cognitive category consists of two listening strategies, four reading strategies and three writing strategies. The surface-level cognitive strategies in listening include (a) *I try to understand what somebody is saying by translating it into Indonesian and (b) I try to understand every individual word to understand the passage.* The surface-level cognitive strategies in reading include (a) *I read the passage aloud, (b) I take notes to remember the ideas, (c) In reading, I pick out keywords and repeat them to myself, (d) I discuss reading passages with my friends, and (e) If I do not understand the content of a reading passage, I ask my friends or my teachers for help.* In writing the surface level cognitive category includes (a) *I try to translate word for word, (b) I mix Indonesian words and English words in writing, and (c) I use Indonesian patterns to keep writing in English.*

#### IV. Conclusion

This present study reveals the use of language learning strategies are vary in the four language skill areas. The strategies involve metacognitive strategies as the highly used by the students, whereas the deep and surface cognitive strategies are moderately used. Metacognitive strategies involve self-direction, self-monitoring, self-evaluating, and self-correcting [6], [8], [14]. The students used deep cognitive strategies to understand, synthesize, analyze texts and apply rules [1]. In contrast, the surface cognitive strategies include the lowest cognitive processes such as recalling knowledge in Bloom's taxonomy.

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