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***The 3rd International Conference on Education and
Language for Students and Adult Learners (ELSA)
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IDENTIFYING LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AMONG POLYTECHNIC COMMERCE STUDENTS IN LEARNING COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH

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Abstract

The scholarly debate on effective second language learning strategies is intensifying with increased globalisation and internalisation of education. Inadequate English language proficiency among Malaysian students has elicited interest in the efforts to appreciate context-specific language strategies suitable for Communicative English classes. This study aimed to identify the language learning strategies employed in Communicative English classes by commerce students in a polytechnic. The study was based on a Malaysian context and targeted a population of commerce students from which a random sample of 90 students was selected to respond to the questionnaire. The research instrument was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire version 7.0. Data collected was coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 22.0 for analysis. The tests conducted revealed that male and female commerce students utilised memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social language learning strategies, but females applied the strategies significantly more than males. Metacognitive strategy was found to be the most popular strategy among the students. It was recommended that learning institutions inspire male students to appreciate the need to use language learning strategies to improve their communicative competence in English.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, English language learning strategies, communicative English, polytechnics.

INTRODUCTION

English language learning strategies include specific actions, behaviours, and techniques that students use to improve their English language skills. Bakar et al. (2019) noted that although existing literature has reported various strategies that English language teachers use to enhance communicative competence, yet students' proficiency level has yet to show significant improvement. English is widely used in Malaysia because it is a second language after Bahasa Melayu, which is the national language (Ping & Luan, 2017). However, the mastery of the English language among technical institution students is low (Bakar et al., 2019). Based on George et al.'s (2023) assertion, average Malaysian students grapple with fluent use of English in speech, writing, and grammar. Students score unsatisfactory results in English-based examinations due to limited verbal fluency, expression in composition writing, and incorrect grammar. Moreover, a lack of English language proficiency is critical in enhancing graduates' employability skills.

Previous studies show that language educators apply various second language learning strategies to help students master a second language (Bakar et al., 2019; Bakri & Osman, 2020). A systematic study by Sahlan et al. (2020) identified strategies for second language learning, such as computer-assisted learning and learner-centered learning. Developing e-learning modules and games significantly improves language mastery (Altınbaş & Savaş, 2020). Learners use their time and experience to store and develop a repertoire of learning strategies that can be transferred across learning contexts. Singh et al.'s (2020) study confirmed that although Malaysian students 'usually apply' all four strategies in English language learning, they use metacognitive strategies most frequently compared to cognitive, social, and compensation strategies. Moreover, Bakar et al. (2019) found that project-based learning had a significant improvement effect on the overall oral communicative competence of 44 diploma students pursuing a Communicative English course at a Malaysian technical college. Although several English language learning strategies exist, teachers' efforts have not alleviated the problem of poor English language competency among Malaysian learners.

The specific objective that the study sought to achieve is to identify the language learning strategies employed in Communicative English class by commerce students in a polytechnic. The study sought to review and clarify language learning skills that commerce students in a polytechnic use to enhance their knowledge and gain a better understanding of the English language. The study findings are significant to local ESL students, English language instructors, educational policymakers, and institutional administrations because they can use the study results to improve the mastery of English language learning and teaching by adjusting the learning strategies appropriately.

METHODOLOGY

The research used a quantitative research design, which involved generating numeric data about English language learning strategies used by a Communicative English class of 90 ESL learners enrolled for a commerce course at a Malaysian polytechnic. The researcher administered the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire version 7.0 (Oxford, 1990) in collecting data to achieve the study objectives. The study population included commerce students enrolled at a polytechnic in Malaysia. A sample of 90 students was selected using a random sampling technique to participate in the study. The data collected were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 for analysis. Normality test was conducted using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test because the number of respondents is more than 50 ($n > 50$) (Mishra et al., 2019). Descriptive and group statistics were generated to analyse the responses of the male and female participants to the SILL questionnaire. Independent sample tests were used to compare the means of two female and male student groups to find out if there are significant differences in the use of English language learning strategies between male and female students.

MAIN RESULTS

Tests for Normality

Tests for normality were conducted using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results were presented using Table 1.

Table 1. Tests of normality

Constructs	Kolmogorov-Smirnov		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Memory	.091	90	.066
Cognitive	.093	90	.054
Compensation	.076	90	.200*
Metacognitive	.092	90	.059
Affective	.070	90	.200*
Social	.088	90	.085

The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test suggest that the null hypothesis can be retained, indicating that the six variables (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social) are not normally distributed as their significance values exceed 0.01. Additionally, all variables had significance values greater than 0.05, indicating that the datasets for memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social language learning strategies follow a normal distribution. Consequently, parametric tests can be employed for further research hypotheses. The utilisation of direct and indirect learning strategies can be investigated for gender differences using two independent sample t-tests.

Descriptive Statistics for English Language Learning Strategies

The study analysed the mean scores and standard deviations for each variable. Table 2 displays the values for each variable.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviations for the English language learning strategies

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
N Valid	90	90	90	90	90	90
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	3.65	3.64	3.53	3.89	3.62	3.79
Std. Deviation	.717	.748	.762	.738	.767	.844
Minimum	1.56	1.00	1.33	1.78	1.83	1.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00

The study results show that all 90 participants responded to all items since there were no missing values. The means values are above 3.5; when rounded to the nearest whole numbers, the values become 4. In the SILL questionnaire, 4 stands

for 'usually true of me'. The results, thus, mean that the statements in the SILL questionnaire for all six English language learning strategies are usually true for most of the students enrolled in a commerce course at the polytechnic. The standard deviations were all below 1, which indicates that there was a low variability in the participant's ratings on the SILL questionnaire statements. However, ranking the scores shows that metacognitive strategies ranked the highest while the least compensation strategies, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Ranking the mean scores for English language learning strategies

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Rank	Std. Deviation
Metacognitive	90	1.78	5.00	3.89	1	.738
Social	90	1.00	5.00	3.79	2	.844
Memory	90	1.56	5.00	3.65	3	.717
Cognitive	90	1.00	5.00	3.64	4	.748
Affective	90	1.83	5.00	3.62	5	.767
Compensation	90	1.33	5.00	3.53	6	.762

A past study by Adan and Hashim (2021) also revealed that most students in Malaysia's education settings employ a metacognitive strategy with the least compensation strategy. It seems that the compensation strategy is not a popular language-learning strategy among Malaysian students. According to Zhang and Lynch (2021), students who employ metacognitive learning strategies aim to maximise their usage of English in various ways. In addition, metacognitive learning is centred around actively paying attention to English speakers, actively seeking out opportunities to communicate with others in English and establishing clear goals for improving English language skills (Garita & Sánchez, 2021; Guapacha Chamorro & Benavidez Paz, 2017). A study conducted by Rongdara et al. (2019) further affirmed that metacognitive learning strategies are more prevalent among Thai and Malaysian higher education students, with memory strategies being rarely utilised.

Gender Differences in the Utilisation of English Language Learning Strategies

The study results showed that the six language learning strategies are 'usually true' among female students while they are 'somewhat true' among male students.

Table 4. Mean scores showing gender differences in the utilisation of English language learning strategies

	Gender	N	Mean	Rounded off	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Memory	Male	19	3.42	3	.723	.166
	Female	71	3.71	4	.708	.084
Cognitive	Male	19	3.38	3	.781	.179
	Female	71	3.71	4	.729	.086
Compensation	Male	19	3.27	3	.770	.177
	Female	71	3.60	4	.750	.089

Metacognitive	Male	19	3.74	3	.720	.165
	Female	71	3.93	4	.742	.088
Affective	Male	19	3.36	3	.836	.192
	Female	71	3.69	4	.739	.088
Social	Male	19	3.51	4	.887	.204
	Female	71	3.87	4	.822	.098

The mean scores for female students for the six language strategies are above 3.5; the mean values become 4 (usually true of me) when rounded off to the nearest whole number. On the other hand, the male students' responses tend towards 3 (somewhat true of me) due to scoring mean values less than 3.5 (~3) except for metacognitive and social strategies which scored 3.74 and 3.51, respectively. Past studies such as Lestari and Wahyudin (2020) and Aziz et al. (2020) have provided evidence that females may slightly differ from males in the use of various English language learning strategies. Bin-Hady et al. (2021) revealed that the differences in the use of strategies do not exhibit significant differences. To test the assertion, the independent sample tests were used to determine whether there is statistical evidence to confirm that the female and male population means are significantly different. Table 4 presents the results of the independent sample test.

Table 4. Independent samples test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Memory	Equal variances assumed	.050	.824	-.1568	88	.121	-.28787	.18361
	Equal variances not assumed			-.1548	27.924	.133	-.28787	.18601
Cognitive	Equal variances assumed	.126	.724	1.745	88	.085	-.33332	.19103
	Equal variances not assumed			1.676	26.996	.105	-.33332	.19887
Compensation	Equal variances assumed	.044	.834	1.689	88	.095	-.32901	.19477
	Equal variances not assumed			1.663	27.829	.108	-.32901	.19785
Metacognitive	Equal variances assumed	.079	.779	1.028	88	.307	-.19587	.19060

	Equal variances not assumed			-	29.084	.304	-.19587	.18726
Affective	Equal variances assumed	.886	.349	-	88	.100	-.32580	.19619
	Equal variances not assumed			-	26.022	.134	-.32580	.21081
Social	Equal variances assumed	.038	.846	-	88	.093	-.36620	.21579
	Equal variances not assumed			-	26.848	.116	-.36620	.22568

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances showed that the p-values for all the six variables (English language learning strategies) are greater than 0.05. Given that the p-values are greater than 0.05, it means that there are no significant differences between the variances. The null hypothesis that there are significant differences between the male and female population means is not rejected. The t-test for Equality of Means shows that the p-values for the six variables are greater than 0.05. The results imply that the difference between the female and male means is not statistically significant. The sample provides strong evidence that the two populations are equal. The finding exhibited consistency with the assertion by Bin-Hady et al. (2021) that the differences in the use of language learning strategies are not significant although females and males may adopt varied strategies. Montero-SaizAja (2021) also found that females exhibit significant use of language learning strategies although the differences are statistically significant in the production of vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated English language learning strategies used by 90 students enrolled in a commerce course at a Malaysian technical college. Findings revealed that the six language learning strategies included in the SILL questionnaire are evident among the sample of students studied. Based on the mean score results, the SILL questionnaire statements depicting various language learning strategies were usually true of female students, but somewhat true of male students. However, the metacognitive strategy was found to be the most popular English language strategy among male and female students. Despite the variations, the study did not find statistically significant differences in the population mean of male and female students in the use of the six language learning strategies. The results coincided with the past findings by Montero-SaizAja (2021) and Bin-Hady et al. (2021) who did not find statistically significant differences in the use of language learning strategies between male and female students. However, it seems that language learning strategies are less popular among male students. Technical institutions such as polytechnics should create awareness and inspire positive attitudes among male students toward using memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social language learning strategies as the best approaches to enhance their communicative competence in English.

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BIODATA

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