

## **LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN GRAMMAR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN GOOD AND POOR LEARNERS IN UiTM PAHANG**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There are differences in UiTM students' performance in English, notably grammar. Some students perform significantly better than others who receive the same amount of instructions in the language. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) on their studies on students' performance in the second language have proven that learners do apply strategies to cope with the difficulties presented by the second language, that 'competent individuals are effective because of special ways of processing information.' The understanding of what learners 'do' during the stages of learning the language can give indication as to why their linguistic profile has taken place, thus, deserves a careful investigation. This is because for the language instructors, frequent failure after years of language study has led to disappointment and frustrations or even anger at the colossal time spent on teaching. For the students, this may lead to the feeling of inferiority which may eventually lead to negative attitudes towards the language. In the light of the examination and comparison of the strategies, we may consider ways to improve the students' level of performance in grammar and to suggest the planning for more effective and instructional practice for the language instructors.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Miller (1984) states that bilingual children do not wake up one morning completely fluent in their second language but proceed through recognisable stages during which time the child's own grammatical rules will be constantly modified. Miller adds that the inability to be proficient in the second language is a 'disease' that needs to be overcome. What the bilingual children 'do' during the stages (of learning the language) and give indications as to why a child's linguistic profile has taken a particular form.

Looking back at our experiences in learning and teaching a second language, i.e English, we have observed that students do exercise differently and develop particular coping strategies to cope with difficulties presented by second language learning. The difference in the acquisition among the learners who receive the same amount of instructions and exposure in that language suggest that a 'good language learner' may employ some different or special techniques and strategies during the learning process. And these strategies might have assisted his or her second language acquisition and learning.

This notion is supported by O' Malley and Chamot (1990) that 'competent individuals are effective because of special ways of processing information' (2). It is also suggested that these special ways of processing information are not exclusively for highly capable individuals only; others who have not discovered them on their own could also learn them. Thus, this notion contrasts sharply with the idea that some people just have an 'ear' for language; that some individuals have an innate or natural ability for language learning.

This finding also significantly indicates that if 'wrong' strategies are applied to any learning situations, these strategies will continuously be used. This may be the cause leading to the inability to master the second language.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Learning Strategies Defined**

O'Malley et al (1990) defines learning strategies as 'the special thoughts or behaviour that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information' (1). In their study, they found that these special ways are not only used at one situation but can actually be retrieved in the future by the learners. In addition, other learners can also learn these special ways or strategies. Thus, this view contrasts with the idea that some people are good at languages, or have innate or natural ability for learning languages.

In addition to that, according to Weinstein and Mayer (1986), learning strategies have learning facilitation as a goal and are intentional on the part of the learner. Furthermore, the goal of strategy use is 'to affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or integrates new knowledge' (Weinstein and Mayer 1986 : 315).

### Empirical Studies on Learning Strategies : An Overview

Many studies in both psychology and psycholinguistic fields have attempted to find out how learners learn and cope with the difficulties presented by second language learning (Rubin 1975; Naiman et. al. 1978; Brown et. al. 1983; Chipman, Segal and Glaser 1985; and Dansereau 1985). Studies done by Rubin (1975) and Naiman et. al. (1978) find that from the students' reports and their observation, students do apply learning strategies while learning a second or foreign language. From the strategies identified, they have proposed classification schemes of the strategies.

Table 1 shows the classifications of learning strategies as proposed by Rubin (1981).

**Table 1 : Classifications Of Learning Strategies In Second Language Acquisition (Rubin 1981)**

Primary Strategy Classification	Representative Secondary Strategies	Representative Examples
Strategies that directly affect learning	Clarification / Verification	Asks for an example of how to use a word or expression, repeat words to confirm understanding.
	Monitoring	Correct own / others' pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, style.
	Memorization	Takes notes of new items, pronounces out loud, finds a mnemonic, write items repeatedly.
	Guessing / Inductive reasoning	Guesses meaning from keywords, structures, pictures, context, etc.
	Deductive reasoning	Compares native / other language to target language. Group words. Looks for rules of co-currence.
	Practice	Experiments with new sounds. Repeats sentences until pronounced easily. Listens carefully and tries to imitate.
Processes that contribute indirectly to Learning	Creates opportunities for practice	Creates situation with native speaker. Initiates conversation with fellow students. Spends time in language lab, listening to tv, etc.
	Production tricks	Uses circumlocutions, synonyms, or cognates. Uses formulaic interaction. Contextualizes to classify meaning.

Naiman et. al. (1978) propose quite a similar yet more detailed classification scheme. Table 2 illustrates the further subdivision of the scheme.

**Table 2: Classifications Of Learning Strategies In Second Language Acquisition (Naiman et al 1978)**

<b>Primary Strategy Classification</b>	<b>Representative Secondary Strategies</b>	<b>Representative Examples</b>
Active task approach	Responds positively to learning opportunity or seeks and exploits learning environment	Student acknowledges need for a structured learning environment and takes a course prior to immersing him / herself in target language
	Adds related to language learning activities to regular classroom program	Reads additional items. Listens to tapes.
	Practices	Writes down words to memorize. Look at speaker's mouth and repeats.
	Analyzes individual problems	Reads alone to hear sounds.
Realization of language as a system	Makes L1/L2 comparisons	Uses cognates. Using that is already known.
	Makes use of the fact that language is a system	Relates new dictionary words to others in same category.
Realization of language as a means of communication	Emphasis fluency over accuracy	Does not hesitate to speak. Uses circumlocutions.
	Seeks communicative situations with L2 speakers	Communicates whenever possible. Establishes close personal contact with L2 native speakers. Writes to penpals.
	Finds sociocultural meanings	Memorizes courtesies and phrases.
Management of affective demands	Copes with affective demands in learning	Overcomes inhibition to speak. Is able to laugh at own mistakes. Is prepared for difficulties.
Monitoring L2 performance	Constantly revises L2 system by testing inferences and asking L2 native speakers for feedback.	Generates sentences and looks for ways to improve so as not to repeat mistakes.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990), on the other hand, recognise these schemes in the cognitive dimension. They categorise the strategies into three categories, namely metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social / affective strategies. These are summarized in Table 3 :

**Table 3 : Classifications Of Learning Strategies In Second Language Acquisition  
(O'Malley and Chamot, 1990)**

<b>Generic Strategy Classification</b>	<b>Representative Strategies</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
Metacognitive Strategies	Selective Attention	Focussing on special aspects of learning task as in planning to listen for key words or phrases.
	Planning	Planning for the organization of other written or spoken discourse.
	Monitoring	Review attention to a task, comprehension that should be remembered, or production while it is occurring.
	Evaluation	Checking comprehension after completion of a receptive language activity, or evaluating language production after it has taken place.
	Rehearsal	Repeating the names of item or object to be remembered.
Cognitive Strategies	Organization	Grouping and classifying words, terminology, or concepts according to their semantic or syntactic attributes.
	Inferencing	Using information in text to guess meanings of new linguistic items, predict outcomes, or complete missing parts.
	Summarizing	Intermittently synthesizing what one has heard to ensure the information has been retained.
	Deducing	Applying rules to the understanding of language.
	Imagery	Using visual images (either generated or actual) to understand and remember new verbal information.
	Transfer	Using known linguistic information to facilitate a new learning task.
Social / Affective Strategies	Questioning for Clarification	Eliciting from a teacher or peer additional explanation, rephrasing, or examples.
	Self-talk	Using mental redirection of thinking to assure oneself that a learning activity will be successful or to reduce anxiety about a task.

### THE STUDY

#### Objective

The objective of this study is to identify the language learning strategies used by the good and the poor learners.

## Sample

A total of sixty two students undergoing the first semester of Pre-Science Diploma Programme for session December 2002-May 2003 were selected for this study. These students took English as one of the compulsory courses and have to attend a six-hour English class every week. Upon completion of this programme, the students will be admitted to the diploma course.

## Instrument

A set of questionnaires with ten questions was used. The questionnaire comprised of a list of strategies used in language learning based on the language learning strategies proposed by Rubin (1981).

## Methodology

The students were classified as good learners and poor learners based on their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English result. Good learners were those who obtained grades 1A to 3C for their English in their SPM examination, a public examination taken in form five. A total of twenty-nine students were identified as good learners. Poor learners were those who obtained grades 7P to 9F in their SPM English and thirty-three were identified as poor learners. Next, the questionnaires were distributed to the students. Once the students have completed the questionnaire, they were collected for analysis. The data collected were later analysed using frequency count.

## FINDINGS

A total of the sixty-two students were involved in this study. Out of sixty-two students, twenty-nine obtained grades 1A to 3C in their SPM English and, thus, labeled as good learners (GL). The remainder thirty-three obtained grades 7P to 9F in the SPM English and they were labeled the poor learners (PL) in this study

The findings of this study were based on responses received from the questionnaires distributed to the students and the findings were discussed based on the number of questions as they appeared in the questionnaire.

For Question 1, the data shows that 62 % GL used a combination of strategies of : *a. refer to dictionary* and *b. guess from context of the sentence to know the meaning of the underlined word given in the sentence*. 35% of these GL appear to also use strategies *a. refer to dictionary* and *c. ask friends*. Only 3% GL used strategy *e. wild guess to get the meaning of the underlined word*.

As for PL, to know the meaning of the word given in Question 1, 67% used *a. refer to dictionary* and *c. ask friends*. The rest 21% PL used a combination of strategies *a. refer to dictionary* and *b. guess from context of the sentence* and only 12% used a combination of strategies *a. refer to dictionary*, *b. guess from the context of the sentences* and *c. ask friends*.

When asked what they do with the word once they know the meaning of the word (Question 2), 55% of GL appeared to use strategies *a. use it in writing*, *b. use it in speaking*, *c. memorise the word* and *e. think of other word with similar meanings*. 31% used strategies *a. use it in writing* *b. use it in speaking* and *e. think of other word with similar meanings*. A small percentage of 14% seemed to also favour strategies *c. memorise the word* and *e. think of other words with similar meanings*.

Meanwhile, 55 % of the PL appeared to like using strategies *a. use it in writing* and *c. memorise the word*. Another 30% PL used strategies *a. use it in writing*, *b. use it in speaking* and *c. memorise the word*. 9% PL used strategies *a. use it in writing*, *b. use it in speaking*, *c. memorise the word* and *e. think of other words with similar meanings*. There is also 6% of the PL chose to *f. do nothing* after knowing the meaning of the new word.

For Question 3, on how they increase their vocabulary, 59% of the GL favour strategies *b. ask friends*, *c. read material in English*, and *e. speak to friends in English*. 31% used strategies *c. read material in English*, *d. write to friends in English* and *e. speak to friends in English* and 10% used strategies *c. read material in English*, *d. write to friends in English* and *e. speak to friends in English*.

48% of the PL also seemed to like using strategies *b. ask friends*, *c. read material* and *e. speak to friends in English* like the GL. The remainder 52% favour strategies *a. ask lecturer*, *b. ask friends* and *c. read material in English*.

For Question 4, the students were given an incorrectly spelt word to be corrected. 34% used *a. refer to dictionary*, *b. ask friends* and *d. wild guess*. 28% of the GL claimed that they used strategies *a. refer to dictionary* and *b. ask friends*, *f. guess the spelling based on pronunciation* and the remainder 18% used strategies *a. refer to dictionary*, *b. ask friends* and *f. guess the spelling based on pronunciation* and 20% used *a. refer to dictionary*, *b. ask friends* and *c. ask lecturer*. Whereas 79% of the PL used strategies *a. refer to dictionary* and *b. ask friends* and *c. ask lecturers* and the rest 21% used strategy *a. refer to dictionary*.

When asked how they know that they have spelt the words given correctly (Question 5), 46% of the GL used strategies *a. help from dictionary*, *b. I trust my friends* and *d. from the pronunciation of the word*, 41% used *a. help from dictionary*, *b. I trust my friends* and only 13% of the GL used *d. from the pronunciation of the words*. 55% of the PL used strategies *a. help from the dictionary* and *b. I trust my friends*, 24% used strategies *a. help from dictionary*, *b. I trust my friends* and *c. I trust my lecturers*, 21%) used strategy *a. help from dictionary*.

For Question 6, 62% of the GL appeared to like using strategy *a. use it in writing and b. remember the spelling*, 31% used strategy *b. remember the spelling* and 7% chose to *e. do nothing*. As for PL, 45% used strategies *a. use it in writing and b. remember the spelling*, 27% used strategy *b. remember the spelling*, 15% used strategy *e. do nothing*, 13% used *a. use it in writing, b. remember the spelling and e. do nothing*.

For Question 7, the students were given a sentence with errors and were told to rewrite the sentence after identifying the errors. 34% of the GL seemed to use more of strategies *a. use similar sentence structure rules in BM and English* and *b. refer to grammar notes* followed by 21% using strategies *b. refer to grammar notes* and *d. ask lecturer*, 17% using *b. refer to grammar notes* and *c. ask friends*, 14% used *a. use similar sentence structure rules in BM and English* and *b. refer to grammar notes* and 10% used strategy *a. use similar sentence structure rules in BM and English*. The majority of the PL, 51%, appeared to like using strategy *b. refer to grammar notes*, 42% used strategy *c. ask friends* and only 7% of the PL used strategies *b. refer to grammar notes* and *d. do nothing*.

For Question 8, the findings show that 51% of the GL liked using strategies *a. help from grammar notes* and *b. trust friends* more. 30% used *a. help from grammar notes*. 12 % used strategies *a. help from grammar notes, b. trust friends* and *c. trust lecturer*. Only 7% of the GL used strategy *e. do nothing*. The PL appeared to also choose more or less the same strategies as the GL for the task given. 64% of the PL used strategies *a. help from grammar notes, b. trust friends* and *c. trust lecturer*, followed by 36% using strategies *a. help from grammar notes and b. trust friends* but none chose strategy *e. do nothing*.

For Question 9, the data shows 48% of the GL preferred strategies *a. memorise the rules, b. do more exercises, e. use it in writing and f. use it in speaking to handle the task at hand* followed by 41% using strategies *b. do more exercises, e. use it in writing and f. use it in speaking* and 11% used strategies *a. memorise the rules, b. do more exercises and e. use it in writing*. Whereas for the PL, 38% liked to solve the task given by using strategies *a. memorise the rules and b. do more exercises* followed by 32% using strategies *a. memorise the rules, e. use it in writing and f. use it in speaking* and 30% using strategies *a. memorise the rules, b. do more exercises and e. use it in writing*.

Finally for Question 10 on what they do to improve their grammar, the GL and PL appeared to have chosen the same group of strategies. 45% of the GL claimed that they used strategies *a. do exercises and d. read a lot in English*, 41% used strategies *a. do exercises, b. memorise the rules and d. read a lot in English*, 10% used *a. do exercises and d. read a lot in English* strategies and 4% used *c. create your own formula for grammar rules*. The majority of the PL 55% used strategies *a. do exercises, b. memorise the rules and d. read a lot in English*, followed by 24% using strategies *a. do exercises and b. memorise the rules* and 21% used strategy *d. read a lot in English*.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

A close examination of the results of this study reveals that in comparison, GL frequently put into practice the grammar knowledge they had learned in speaking or writing. However, this is not the case for PL. In

other words, GL were found making their own opportunities for practising what they had learned which is one of the characteristics of proficient learners identified by Rubin and Thompson (1994). These GL depended on repeating, analysing and getting the idea. Such strategies are vital for learning grammar and should form the core of classroom strategy instruction. Therefore, the most important implication of this study is the need for teachers to identify or show learners, particularly PL of these learning strategies, explain the rationale and application for using the strategies, provide more opportunities and materials for practice and evaluate or assist them to evaluate their degree of success with the new learning strategies (O'Malley and Chamot 1990).

In addition, the results also show that there was high use of cognitive strategies by GL compared to PL learners. GL were found using more linguistic knowledge and contextual cues to help them in comprehension and preferred strategies requiring them to exercise their mental faculties. In general, these strategies help GL in deep processing, forming and revising the grammar knowledge they had learned in order to comprehend and produce it. The adoption of some cognitive strategies shows GL's awareness and need for the entering, storing and retrieving of information necessary for grammar learning. Thus, teachers ought to train learners exercise their mental faculties as deep learning is more meaningful than surface learning through rote memorisation.

### CONCLUSION

Strategies, unlike personality characteristics of a learner are amenable to change. Ineffective ones can be changed or rejected, new strategies can be learned and well-functioning strategies can be adopted to suit new situation, stage of learning, material and task. Sensitising learners to learning strategies suitable for them would assist learners in optimising their learning abilities. However, before teaching learners how to use strategies effectively, teachers should be trained in strategy training and assessment.

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## Appendix

## LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN GRAMMAR

## QUESTIONNAIRE

Please tick applicable answers

## A. Personal Background

## 1. Gender

Male

Female

## 2. English SPM result

\_\_\_\_\_

## B. Read the questions below carefully. You may circle more than one answer.

## 1. Study the sentence given below.

The robber walked away stealthily as he did not want to get caught.

What do you do to know the meaning of the underlined word?

- a. refer to dictionary
- b. guess from the context of the sentence
- c. ask friends
- d. ask lecturers
- e. wild guess
- f. do nothing

## 2. Once you know the meaning, what do you do with the word?

- a. use it in writing
- b. use it in speaking
- c. memorize the word
- d. add the word into a vocabulary book
- e. think of other words with similar meanings
- f. do nothing

## 3. How do you increase your vocabulary?

- a. ask lecturer
- b. ask friends
- c. read materials in English
- d. write to friends in English
- e. speak to friends in English
- f. read dictionary
- g. do nothing

4. You are given the word **embarrassment**. The spelling of this word is incorrect. Please correct it.

Correct spelling \_\_\_\_\_

What do you do to make sure the spelling is correct?

- a. refer to dictionary
- b. ask friends
- c. ask lecturer
- d. wild guess
- e. do nothing

## 5. How do you know that you have spelt the words above correctly?

- a. help from dictionary
  - b. I trust my friends
  - c. I trust my lecturers
  - d. From the pronunciation of the word
  - e. Wild guess
6. Once you know the correct spelling, what do you do to make you remember it?
- a. use it in writing
  - b. memorize the spelling
  - c. write down in a vocabulary book
  - d. have spelling test with friends
  - e. do nothing
7. There is an error(s) in the sentence given below. Circle the error (s) and rewrite the whole sentence correctly.

Correct sentence : \_\_\_\_\_

What do you do before correcting the mistakes in the sentence given?

- a. use similar sentence structure rules in BM & English
  - b. refer to grammar notes
  - c. ask friends
  - d. ask lecturer
  - e. wild guess
  - f. do nothing
8. How do you know that you have corrected the sentence correctly?
- a. help from grammar notes
  - b. trust friends
  - c. trust lecturer
  - d. wild guess
  - e. do nothing
9. What do you do to make sure you do not make the same mistake the next time?
- a. memorize the rules
  - b. do more exercises
  - c. ask friends
  - d. ask lecturers
  - e. use it in writing
  - f. use it in speaking
  - g. do nothing
10. On the whole, what have you done to improve your grammar?
- a. do exercises
  - b. memorize the rules
  - c. create your own formula for grammar rules
  - d. read a lot in English
  - e. do nothing