

## Language Learning Strategies Employed by Part Time Students and Working Adults of Long Distance Program

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### ABSTRACT

Learning never stops as long as he or she has the determination to learn. Due to that, university either private or public offers long distance program or part time program to cater for matured students or working adults who have missed the opportunity to study after they completed their secondary school. For instance Universiti Utara Malaysia offers long distance degree programs to fill the gap in providing working adults opportunity to proceed with their degree. Learning at a later age might be a challenge for working adults who have left school for many years and to some of them, English is a foreign language to them as there is no requirement for them to use that. In other words, they have stopped using English for many years. However, in any degree program, English is always compulsory subject which students cannot avoid. Thus, based on that situation, this study is interested to find out how these students learn English or to be specific to find out the language learning strategies employed. Apart of that, this study will look into any relationship between gender and age on language learning strategies. The respondents will be the working adults who are currently doing their degree on long distance mode at one of the public universities in Johor Bahru. As to obtain data for this study, questionnaire on language learning strategies will be used. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which was introduced by Oxford in 1990 will be employed as to obtain data to confirm with the research objective. Apart of that, demographic questions will also be asked as the basis of this study. Later, the data will be analysed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and descriptive data will be presented and discussed. The finding can be useful information for the lecturers teaching them as that can help lecturers to prepare suitable materials according to their preferred language learning strategies

**KEYWORDS:** Language Learning Strategies, Working Adults, Long Distance Program.

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### INTRODUCTION

Each individual is different not only the physical and look, the way they go through their life are also different. Some are lucky having the opportunity to go straight to university after secondary school, while some have to find work as to survive. Due to demand from these working adults who have put aside their intention to study for some time and at the same to improve themselves academically, universities offer part time or long distance programs to suit them. These adult learners who have various working experience may tackle learning differently as compared to when they were in school. Furthermore, some have stopped for some time from using English in their daily lives. Thus, it is important to know their preferred language learning strategies so that lecturers may prepare suitable approach. Apart of that, each individual is different in many ways such as cognitive and so does the way they approach learning. It is a challenging mystery to find out from each individual on how learning takes place and why some succeed, while some were not [6]. Due to that, study on language learning strategies is still relevant due to differences of each individual.

Furthermore, since they are on long distance program which face-to-face is only once a month, the students are on student-centred learning approach. Thus, it is important to find out these students language learning strategies as they are on student-centred learning most of the time. In a study by [16] highlighted that generally teachers are not aware of the students' language learning strategies and so does the students. Due to that, students are not able to fully utilise the strategies that could enhance their language performance. Language learning strategy is one of the factors which involve in processing incoming data [9]. Thus, teachers need to identify learners' preferences on the strategy to process delivered information so that they are able to acquire the language more effectively as they are on self-centred learning due to the nature of the long-distance program. As mentioned by [6], useful strategies complete three conditions which are relate to task of second language, fit learner's learning style and effective used of strategies and link with other relevant strategies which contribute

to faster learning, more enjoyable, more self-directed [17] and allow learners to be more independent, autonomous and lifelong learning [1].

Since the respondents are working adults and they have left school for some time, it is important for the lecturers to know the most preferred strategies that they employ as that may assist lecturers to prepare suitable teaching activities or approach. Thus, the main objective of this study is to find out the most frequent language learning strategies employed by adult learners who are also working adults. This group of learners have left school for years, and due to that, it is important to investigate on the strategies that they used in order to learn English. Furthermore, there is possibility that some of them have stopped using English since it is not necessary to use English in their job. Hence, it is interesting to find out on their preference on language learning strategies. Besides that, this study looks into the relationship between gender, age and semester toward language learning strategies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on language learning strategies have been investigated for quite some time which involved respondents from different background. Nevertheless, the issue is still interesting to look into as learners are unique individual which differ one from the other. Furthermore, studies which involved adult learners cum working adults are quite limited which may due to limited number of working adults who are on part time study. However, there is yet definite reasons to the reasons behind the limited number of study on adult learners cum working adults who are on part time or long distance study.

There are various definitions on language learning strategies even though there is no common consensus yet on the definition, classification and instrumentation of strategies [12]. Nevertheless, this study provides some definitions from some established scholars. According to [18], language learning strategies are defined as strategies employ by learners which contribute to language system and give direct impact to learners. Nevertheless, in [17] provides much detail definition which is steps taken in order to acquire, store, retrieve and use information. Besides that, in [15] define language learning strategies as special thoughts or behaviours that learners use for them to understand, learn or retain new information. Thus, it is important for lecturers to know learners' preferred language strategies so that teaching and learning could take place in which the learners may maximize their language acquisition. This study refers to the theory of language learning strategies by Oxford which divided language learning strategies into two main strategies namely direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies require cognitive or mental to process the information, while indirect strategies function as indirect support via focusing, planning, evaluating, find opportunities, control anxiety, increase cooperation and empathy and other ways. Each main strategy consists of three sub-strategies. In details, direct strategy consists of memory, cognitive and compensation strategy; while indirect strategy consists of metacognitive, affective and social strategy. Memory strategy is used to store and retrieve information, cognitive is used to understand and produce the language, and compensation is used to overcome limitations in language learning. As for indirect strategy, metacognitive is employed to plan and monitor learning, affective is employed to control emotions, and motivation, while social is employed to cooperate with others in language learning [17].

There were also other theories of language learning strategies by other scholars such as [15, 3]. O'Malley and Chamot stress on the interaction between teacher and learners focusing more on scaffolding and development of metacognitive with the rubric of Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). Nevertheless, Biggs categorized language learning strategies according to the purpose of learning and the instrument introduced was known as Study Processes Questionnaire which emphasized on motivation and learning strategies. There are three categories namely surface, achieving and deep. Surface refers to getting the task done with little personal investment, while achieving refers to succeed in competition to obtain good marks, and deep refers to making personal investment in the task via association and elaboration [6].

A study which involved 55 participants from the range of 18 to 40 years old was conducted [8]. The participants were a combination of various cultural and nationality. Their study looked into the relationship between language learning strategies and learners' language proficiency, gender and nationality. Based on the study, it was found that there was a relationship between language proficiency and language learning strategies. Students who are at intermediate level of language proficiency used more strategies as compared to advanced and elementary level of language proficiency. Most respondents preferred to use metacognitive while the least strategies used were affective and memory. As for gender, females frequently used affective and social strategies as compared to males. In another study which involved adults Vietnamese refugees, it was found that males used more variety of strategies as compared to their counterpart [21]. Tran rationalised the finding by stating that males have to survive in other country as they are the bread winner of the family. However, a study in Singapore found no significant differences between gender and language learning strategies [22]. In local context, in [14, 13] have investigated on learning strategies employed by undergraduates in Malaysia and it was found that they preferred cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

In another study among undergraduates in Malaysia, in [10] discovered that proficient language learners were in favour of cognitive strategies for listening, reading and writing as compared to less proficient language learners. The less proficient learners opted for affective, compensation and metacognitive language learning strategies. As compared to the studies by [14, 13], the results were consistent where the most preferred language learning strategy was cognitive. Findings from these two studies among undergraduates in Malaysia are parallel where the respondents who were proficient language learners opted for cognitive strategies in learning language. Based on a study by [20] which involved Malay students at tertiary level, they were in favour of compensation and affective learning strategies due to their lack of language proficiency. This was seconded by [10] that less proficient language learners used strategies with less challenges. A study with 418 students in Taiwan produced the same result where more proficient learners used metacognitive and cognitive strategies [11].

Learning environment influences language learning process [13]. This is based on a study among two different groups of respondents in Malaysia. One group used Bahasa Melayu as medium of instruction, while the other group used Mandarin. It was found that the students used different learning strategies due to different approach of learning employed by each school. Thus, he concluded that learning environment, regardless of in school or out of school influences the learning strategies employed. Another common variable which has always been discussed over language learning strategies is age since it is an important factor which influence preferred language learning strategies [14]. This has been proved by a study in New Zealand which involved 348 students of different age from 21 countries [7]. The finding shows significant differences in selecting language learning strategies according to age. However, the study did not explain in detail how does age relate to language learning strategies [14], even though age influences language learning strategies employed by learners.

Apart of age, gender is another variable which has always been focusing on over language learning strategies. There is yet conclusive relationship between gender and language learning strategies [14]. Generally men and women are different, thus there is possibility that differences exist in their preferred language learning strategies as found in studies such as [2] found significant relationship between gender and language learning strategies among undergraduates in one of the universities in Turkey that involved 257 students who were at the same level of language proficiency. The same result was found in another study in Dubrovnik which involved 181 college students learning different foreign language such as German, Spanish, French and Italian [4]. It was found that gender has significant relationship with language learning strategies which female use more frequently all types of leaning strategies except socio-affective. Nevertheless, different finding was found in a study with 50 respondents of Islamic Azad Shiraz University in Turkey [23]. Males students used more frequent on all the strategies but not social strategies which both male and female were not in favour. This finding is different than the finding from [4] as they found that females use more frequent strategies than males.

**METHODOLOGY**

Questionnaire was employed as the method to obtain required data. The questionnaire employed for this study is Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) from [17] which consists of 50 items with 5 Likert scale. The questionnaire is divided into 2 sections where the first section is on demographic data, followed by SILL in second section. The respondents were adult learners who are also working adults currently doing their degree on long distance program with one of the public universities which has established the program. There were 31 respondents involved in this study and they were from two different groups where 11 of them from semester 3, while another 20 respondents were from semester 4. They have years of working experience. For this program, the students meet once every month for four consecutive months in each semester. Most of the respondents are attached to the government sectors but from various departments, such as state government, education, royal police and others. The questionnaire was distributed to the respondents during class time as that is the only time the researcher can meet them. They have to complete the questionnaire during the class as to avoid questionnaire from missing and to save time. If the respondents bring back the questionnaire, researcher will have to wait for another month to collect and there is risk of missing questionnaire. Furthermore, there are only 50 questions of SILL which may take less than 10 minutes to be completed. The data obtained was analysed via Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) as to provide descriptive statistics. Before the questionnaire was distributed to the respondents, the questionnaire was checked for its Cronbach alpha. The details as below:

Type of Language Learning Strategies	Cronbach Alpha
Memory (1-9)	0.845
Cognitive (10-23)	0.885
Compensation (24-29)	0.862
Metacognitive (30-38)	0.906
Affective (39-44)	0.827
Social (45-50)	0.827

According to the data above, it shows that the questionnaire is reliable to be used for this study. The Cronbach alpha for each language learning strategy is between 0.827 and 0.906 in which is in a range of strong reliability and can be used as instrument for this study. In [5] stated that Cronbach alpha in between 0.65 to 0.95 shows satisfactory level of reliability of the questionnaire. If the Cronbach alpha is lower than 0.65 it means that the questionnaire needs to be modified and re-test for the reliability prior to use it in the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the questionnaire distributed to the respondents were analysed by using SPSS. The details of the respondents according to gender, age and semester as below:

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male-17	54.8
	Female-14	45.2
<b>Age</b>	(24-28)-10	32.3
	(29-33)-14	45.2
	(34-38)-6	19.4
	(39-43)-1	3.2
<b>Semester</b>	Semester 3-11	35.5
	Semester 4-20	64.5

To answer the first objective of this study, Table 2 provides the details of the analysis.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of respondents on SILL categories

SILL	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
<b>Memory</b>	2.11	4.22	3.3226	0.52849
<b>Cognitive</b>	2.50	4.29	3.2235	0.49855
<b>Compensation</b>	2.40	5.40	3.8903	0.80637
<b>Metacognitive</b>	2.22	4.36	3.4086	0.57763
<b>Affective</b>	2.00	4.33	2.9409	0.61996
<b>Social</b>	2.33	4.83	3.3387	0.65332

The data shows that the respondents from the adult working learners prefer to use direct language learning strategy which is compensation as compared to other language learning strategies. It is followed by indirect language learning strategy which is metacognitive and social language learning strategies. While, the least strategy preferred by the respondents is affective strategy with the lowest mean of 2.9409. This finding shows a slight difference as compared to finding from other study which involved Malaysian university students that preferred metacognitive and social language learning strategies [9]. This study found out that working adults who are on part time study prefer to use compensation language learning strategy as compared to full time university students which in favour of metacognitive and social strategies. However, it is parallel with the finding from a study among Malay students at tertiary level that preferred compensation strategies over other learning strategies [20] and the respondents were not proficient in English. However, this study does not intend to find respondents' language proficiency and due to that, conclusion could not be made whether the respondents in this study are none proficient language users. Thus, other study may be conducted to look into proficiency level of respondents and their language learning strategies. The difference in preference of language learning strategies among working adults who are on long distance program could be due to other factors which can be looked into in future study. Some possibilities to this preference could be working experience and environment at work place. As mentioned earlier, these respondents are all working adults attach to mostly government agencies. Working environment might influence their preference of language learning strategies. Nevertheless, this is only the possible reason which needs to be confirmed in future study.

In details, the respondents prefer compensation strategy which consists of five items (item number 24 to number 29) from SILL questionnaire. Among these five items in compensation category, the respondents were in favour of item number 25 and 29. These reflect that they prefer to use gestures when they have no idea on words to use during conversation and they used word or phrase that means the same thing when they cannot think of English word. The least strategy used was creating or making up new words when they do not know the correct words. The second highest preference is metacognitive language learning strategy and there are 9 items which are from question number 30 to number 38. The respondents seem to find people that can speak in English for them to converse in the language (item 35). It is followed by paying attention when someone is talking in English (item 32) and try to find better way to be better learner of English (item 33).

As for second objective on the relationship between gender and language learning strategies, the finding shows mixed results which consist of negative and positive correlation, which generally weak relationship. The details as in Table 3:

Table 3: Correlation between gender, age and semester and language learning strategies

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
Gender	-0.328	-0.215	-0.283	-0.133	-0.107	-0.243
Age	0.360	0.119	0.50	0.19	0.36	-0.52
Semester	0.028	-0.035	0.271	0.098	0.131	0.303

It seems that there is no correlation between gender and language learning strategies. The correlation between gender and language learning strategies are negatively correlated and weak. Nevertheless, there is positive correlation between age and language learning strategies even though it is weak, except the relationship between age and compensation which is at the average level. This may due to maturity that comes with age. As for the relationship between semester and language learning strategies, there is positive relationship but below than average level. This could be due to respondents who were in semester 3 were just taking English subject as the first English subject in their program as compared to respondents who were in semester 4 which have passed the first English subject in their program and now they are on the second English subject. It means that the respondents who were in semester 4 know the best language learning strategies for them. There are three English subjects that the respondents have to take along their study and they must pass all of them. The first English subject is offered when the students are in semester 3, while the other two English subjects are offered in the following semesters. For those who failed the subject, they must retake the subject and pass in order to enrol in another English subject.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that compensation is the most preferred language learning strategies by the group of second language learners who are working adults. They are on long distance learning program which allow them to study and work at the same time. By identifying learners' preferred language learning strategies, teachers may take into consideration on suitable activities to enable learners acquire the language easier. Teachers may design teaching method by incorporating activities that suit learners preferred learning strategies. Apart of that, in [19] recommended that teachers should be trained on language learning strategies prior teaching the students. They should also be well versed in giving assessment according to the preferred strategies and at the same time try to encourage students to focus more on certain strategies such as cognitive strategies as proficient language learners employed more cognitive strategies as compared to social or affective learning strategies [20]. On the perspective of learners, training on language learning strategies might be useful as from the training they can try any strategies and find the most suitable strategies for them. As for future research, there are quite a number of variables to be looked into which related to working adults who are on study either part time or long distance program. Other variables over language learning strategies which are possible to focus in the future such as number of years they have been working, government sector over private sector, previous qualification and language proficiency.

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