Assessing Malaysian Gifted Students' Strategies in Language Learning

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Abstract

Language learning strategies (LLS) are steps taken by learners not only to assist in language learning but also to achieve competency in the target language. This paper identifies the variation English language learning strategies used by Malaysian gifted students based on a Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire by Oxford (1990). It will also look at strategies used according to a students' level of language proficiency and gender. Data were gathered using a survey questionnaire with 104 gifted students. The findings revealed that in terms of language proficiency, intermediate proficiency students employed more language learning strategies compare to high and low language proficiency students. Metacognitive strategies data indicated the most frequently employed strategies for all three groups. However, the rank of usage varies according to LLS category across the three groups. Both intermediate and low proficiency female students have more positive attitudes and make more effort to enhance their English language proficiency by employing more strategies

Keywords *language learning strategies, gifted Malaysian students, language proficiency, English as a second language*

INTRODUCTION

There are many definitions of language learning strategies (LLS) by researchers. So, it is important to define a strategy. According to (Brown 2000), strategies are classified as a specific method of approaching a problem; task, mode of operation for achieving end, and a planned design for controlling and manipulating certain information .Strategies contain not only action but also a goal and a learning situation (Macaro, 2003).

Oxford (1990) defined a language learning strategy as specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that students use (often consciously) to improve their progress in developing second language skills. All language learners use language learning strategies either consciously or subconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks in the language classroom. Nquyen (2008) refer to LLS as learners' attempts to find the quickest and easiest way to do what is required when facing new input and difficult tasks in language classroom.

LLS are also amendable to change as they are influenced by a variety of factors.In addition, individual differences are the most important predictors of achievement in a second language (Dörnyei, 2005). Researchers often point out the necessity of making further advances into uncovering how certain individual differences affect and underlie important language learning processes (Dörnyei, 2005; Kormos & Sáfár, 2008; Robinson, 2007). The variety in the use of strategies by learners is the result of this factor, especially, in Malaysian context, where learners are diversify by differentcultures and beliefs. This is more obvious in second language learning which is English. Accordingly, many studies have been done on language learning strategies utilized by different learners and in various contexts. However, very few studies have been done on gifted Malaysian students regarding language learning (Melor, Nur Ainil, Mohammed Amin, 2013). Therefore, this study aims to investigate language learning strategies employed by gifted students enrolled in special programme called the PERMATApintar Education Programme.

The education of gifted students in Malaysia started receiving attention once again when a mathematics prodigy by the name of Adi Putra Abd. Ghani was identified as having superior intelligence in mathematics and was offered several options for acceleration and enrichment learning programme by several local universities. From then on and through the lobbying of Tan Sri Dato' Dr. Sharifah Hapsah Syed Shahabudin, the Vice Chancellor of UKM together with the encouraging support from YAB Datin Seri Paduka Rosmah Mansor, the wife of the Deputy Prime Minister of

Malaysia, the PERMATApintar Negara Project was founded and the education for gifted students revived once again.

In early 2009, Pusat PERMATApintar Negara was launched as the first national centre of excellence for Malaysian academically gifted children. It aims to develop a comprehensive educational programme that would be responsible for fostering positive growth of the nation's gifted students, in terms of physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social aspects (Noriah, Rosadah & Siti Rahayah 2009). The PERMATApintar Education Programme was introduced as an educational programme for gifted students that focused on holistic teaching and learning based on the National Education Philosophy. The programme is a full-time programme that takes about two years. It emphasizes instruction in which the gifted are learning at their own pace and ability. The selected students of this programme are aged 16 to 17 years old from all over Malaysia who have undertaken three screening tests namely UKM1, UKM2 and UKM3. However, the students were selected based on their exceptional ability in the mathematics and science domains only. The language competency and ability were not part of the assessment, hence, leaving this potential unknown.

PERMATApintar's concept of giftedness was based on Gagnê's (1995) *Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent*. The model sets a distinction between giftedness and talent which reflects on the difference between potential and achievement. Giftedness refers to a student's distinctive potential and ability in one or more domains while talent refers to outstanding performance in one or more fields of human activity which emerges from ability prior to the student's learning experience (Gagnê, 2000). In Gagnê's model, natural abilities or giftedness may be enhanced into well trained and systematically developed skills (talents) using a number of catalysts. Therefore, it is vital to investigate the language learning strategies used by gifted Malaysian students as gifted appropriate strategies coupled with rigorous intellectual demands may provide worthwhile educational experiences for gifted students (Van Tassel- Baska, 2003).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Ellis (2002), LLS are among the key factors affecting a learner's rate of language acquisition and level of proficiency. It means that, the use of LLS effectively might enhance proficiency in the target language. Therefore, many studies done in the past have established a positive link between language proficiency and strategy use (Adel, 2011, Yoong 2010, Haifa 2010), indicating that more proficient learners use more strategies than less proficient learners. For this study, language proficiency refers to the ability to comprehend and command of the target language. Most of the previous studies done measured language proficiency using standardized test such as TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language) (Rahimi, Riazi, Saif, 2008), Malaysian University English Test (MUET) (Yoong, 2010), students GPA's in English course (Adel, 2011) and or self-rating by learners (Adel, 2011; Isa, 2008).

In addition, a majority of studies conducted show that high proficiency learners or high achievers employ more strategies than intermediate and low proficiency learners or achievers (Adel 2011, Yoong 2010, et. al 2008). Whereas, some others studies revealed that intermediate proficiency learners or intermediate achievers used more strategies than high or low proficiency learners or achievers (Haifa 2010, Isa, 2008, Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). Nevertheless in general, a majority of studies concluded that the higher the proficiency in the target language the higher the use of language learning strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative methodology to investigate gifted Malaysian students' language learning strategy use in specific and in terms of language proficiency. A total of 104 gifted students from the second batch (form four) of the gifted students under the PERMATApintar Programme were selected for this study.The instrument used in this study was a set of questionnaires adapted from the Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (1990), that categorized strategies into two

categories; direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies deal with the new language like working with the language itself in a variety of specific tasks and situations.Direct strategies deal with the new language like working with the language itself in a variety of specific tasks and situations. All direct strategies require mental processing of the language, but the three groups of direct strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation) do this processing differently and for different purposes. Indirect language learning strategies, which contribute indirectly but powerfully to learning, are also subdivided into three groups: meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. The set consisted of 50 statements and each statement was given a four-point Likert scale. The set of questionnaires was utilized to identify the difference in language learning strategies used by Malaysian gifted students based on language proficiency. This study measures gifted students' language proficiency based on their level of achievement in mid semester examination for English subject.

Table 1 *Distribution of Marks*

Marks	Grade	Performance
90-100	A+	
80-89	A	High Proficiency
70-79	A-	
65-69	B+	
60-64	B	
55-59	C+	Intermediate Proficiency
50-54	C	
45-49	D	
40-44	E	Low Proficiency
0-39	G	

The examination used a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) examination format to assess all language skills except for the speaking skill. TOEFL evaluates the ability of an individual to understand and use English in academic setting. It is a standardized test that is used as admission requirement for non-native English speakers at many English-speaking college and universities. The maximum total of TOEFL score is 677 for paper based test and 120 for TOEFL iBT. However, total score for students' mid semester result are converted to 100 as it excludes speaking skill. The higher the total score indicates a better performance and proficiency. This study uses the term 'high proficiency', 'intermediate proficiency' and 'low proficiency' to refer to students' level of proficiency based on their result. Table 1.0 shows distribution of marks, grade and language proficiency based on the exam. The distribution of marks and grade were based on PERMATApintar Grading System.

RESULTS

Overall, the respondents were graded as 14 high proficiency, 67 intermediate proficiency and 23 low proficiency. The results were taken from students from seven classes with the marks ranging from 29.0-85.6. Taken all together, it can be concluded that almost a majority (64.4%) of the respondents are at intermediate level of proficiency of English due to their performance on the mid semester examination. In addition, 22.1% of the respondents are low achievers of English language and the rest of 13.5% are high achievers which indicates that they have higher language competency compared to the rest (see table 2). The students' performance seemed low as the examination was not based on a SPM standard. The PERMATApintar Education Programme challenged the students to go beyond their level in order to identify their true potential. Therefore, the students took mock TOEFL tests for their mid semester examination. The marks were given based on TOEFL standardization.

Table 2 *Distribution of Mid Term Result For English*

Marks	Grade	Proficiency	Frequency
90-100	A+		0
80-89	A	High Proficiency	5
70-79	A-		9
65-69	B+		10
60-64	B		11
55-59	C+	Intermediate Proficiency	21
50-54	C		25
45-49	D		12
40-44	E	Low Proficiency	8
0-39	G		3
			104

Strategy Use Based on Language Proficiency

Language learning strategies used by gifted students based on the language proficiency are shown in table 3. The results reveal that all three groups use indirect strategies more than direct strategies when learning English language. Furthermore, intermediate proficiency students use more strategies compare to low and high achievers with mean score of 2.581.

Metacognitive strategies are the most frequently used strategies for all three groups. However, the rank of usage differs according to LLS categories across the three groups. High proficiency students recorded the highest use of metacognitive strategies (M=3.008) and the lowest use of affective strategies (M=1.881) among the groups.

Cognitive strategies were the second most often employed by high proficiency followed by social strategies, compensation and memory strategies. As for the intermediate proficiencystudents, it is reported that four out of six categories are at a high level of use and with metacognitive strategies highly employed followed by social strategies, compensation strategies, and cognitive strategies. In addition, the second most often used strategy by low proficiency students was compensation strategies, follow then by social, cognitive, affective and memory strategies.

Table 3 *Strategy Use Based on Language Proficiency*

	High Proficiency(N=14)		Intermediate Proficiency(N=67)		Low Proficiency (N=23)	
	Mean	Frequency	Mean	Frequency	Mean	Frequency
Memory	2.294	Low	2.389	Low	2.256	Low
Cognitive	2.776	High	2.568	High	2.388	Low
Compensation	2.417	Low	2.657	High	2.789	High
Metacognitive	3.008	High	2.769	High	2.734	High
Affective	1.881	Low	2.381	Low	2.333	Low
Social	2.738	High	2.746	High	2.572	High
Total	2.576		2.581		2.490	

The findings of this study show that intermediate proficiency students use more strategies compared to low and high proficiency. Such result appeared in other studies, such as Isa (2008), Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006). Presumably, advanced learners or in this context high achiever students' habitual and successful application of language strategies may be internalized and they do not report what has become for them an automated process (Hong-Nam & Leavell 2006). Therefore, their strategy use appears to be lower than intermediate proficiency students. In addition, metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used by all groups. High proficiency students demonstrate the highest use of metacognitive strategies (M=3.008) and the lowest use of affective strategies (M=1.881) among the groups. As for intermediate achievers, it is reported that four out of six categories are at high level of

use with metacognitive strategies is highly employed followed by social strategies, compensation strategies, cognitive strategies.

Table 4: *LLS Use Based on Gender and Language Proficiency*

	High Proficiency(N=14)		Intermediate Proficiency(N=67)		Low Proficiency (N=23)	
	Male(7)	**Female (7)**	**Male (27)**	**Female (40)**	**Male(13)**	**Female (10)**
Memory	2.444	2.143	2.449	2.350	2.239	2.278
Cognitive	2.918	2.633	2.545	2.584	2.302	2.500
Compensation	2.619	2.214	2.648	2.662	2.872	2.683
Metacognitive	2.921	3.095	2,745	2.786	2.547	2.978
Affective	2.167	1.595	2.228	2.483	2.154	2.567
Social	2.976	2.500	2.728	2.758	2.538	2.617
Total	2.674	2.363	2.557	2.604	2.442	2.604

In addition, the second most often used strategy by low proficiency students was compensation strategies, follow by social, cognitive, affective and memory strategies. Less proficient learners needed these compensatory strategies more because they run into knowledge roadblocks more often than learners who are more proficient in the target language. In addition, compensation strategies are used to make up the incompetency in the target language. Lack of vocabulary and not enough confident to use the target language in classroom lead them to use more compensation strategies. However, the more proficient students were thestudents who applied compensation strategies and were perceived to show high flexibility in using and altering language for different use (Chew & Tian 2012).

In terms of gender, high proficiency male students, intermediate proficiency female students and low proficiency female students showed higher mean scores for overall strategies compared with high proficiency female students, intermediate proficiency male students and low proficiency male students (see table 4). For high proficiency level students, overall mean score of strategies for male was high. Surprisingly, the total mean score of high proficiency female students was at a low level with the lowest score among all levels of proficiencies. Ellig and Morin (2001) stated that "women have been trained since childhood to be less direct. Young girls were traditionally taught to believe that they would get more through coyness than through directness. Women simply gather and process information differently from men. In fact, they approach the whole process of communication in a different way" (p 110). It can be presumed that, although the female students have high language proficiency, they are not directly expressive or unaware of their automatized strategies in language learning due to their natural norms. This might affect the low mean score of strategies used by high proficiency female students especially in affective strategies compared to high proficiency male students.

Moreover, both intermediate and low proficiency female students revealed higher mean scores compared to intermediate and low proficiency male students. According to Ellis (2002), female students often have more positive attitudes and as a result achieve greater success in learning a second language. In addition, a number of researchers (i.e. Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003) continue to assume female superiority in language development. Hence, it can be assumed that both intermediate and low proficiency female students have more positive attitudes and efforts to enhance their English language proficiency by employing more strategies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study provide greater understanding of the language learning strategies used by form four gifted Malaysian students at PERMATApintar National Gifted Centre. The results revealed that in general, these students used similar strategies such as the highest use of metacognitive strategies similar with studies done in Malaysia's context. This indicated that although

PERMATApintar gifted students have high ability in the cognitive domain that affects the way they learn and think, they still employed similar and conventional strategies in language learning.

Therefore, it is important to be exposed to various language learning strategies available that cater for the gifted students' needs so that the students' unique characteristics and abilities can be optimized in language learning. However, it is not enough just to know about the strategies. Students should also understand how to apply them strategically. Hence, the teacher's role in language learning is crucial in order to make sure that the students reach their full potential and fully utilize their special characteristics to enhance their proficiency in the language. Teachers need to help the students to identify their own learning strategies that suits them to enhance their performance. This is important to teacher as those who understand students' language learning strategies are able to design the course content in a way that benefits students the most and thuscan enhance the teaching and learning process in the classroom by adjusting the approach in teaching.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, in terms of language proficiency theintermediate proficiency students employed more language learning strategies compare to high and low language proficiency students similar to results presented in other studies such as Isa (2008), Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006). In addition, the finding revealed that all three groups of students used indirect strategies more than direct strategies when learning English language. Metacognitive strategies were the most frequently employed strategies for all three groups. However, the rank of usage varies according to LLS category across three groups.

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