

**LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY USE:  
A STUDY OF B. Ed. (TESL) PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that learners use to assist their progress in developing second or foreign language skills (Oxford, 1990). This paper presents the findings of a study to explore the language learning strategies of 50 pre-service teachers (23 males, 27 females) enrolled in two different groups of a Bachelor of Education (TESL) program in Batu Lintang Teachers' Institute. Strategy use was assessed through administering the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL), a 50-item self-scoring survey developed by Oxford (1990). Overall, strategy use of pre-service teachers in both groups was moderate, with pre-service teachers reporting most frequent use of metacognitive strategies, followed by compensation, cognitive, social and memory strategies. Affective strategies were least often reported by both groups of pre-service teachers. Female pre-service teachers reported of greater use of language learning strategies than males did. In conclusion, implications of the findings and suggestions for further research are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *language learning, strategy use, TESL, pre-service teachers*

## ABSTRAK

*Strategi-strategi pembelajaran bahasa merupakan tingkah laku spesifik atau teknik-teknik yang pelajar mengguna untuk membantu mengembang kemahiran mereka dalam pembelajaran bahasa kedua atau bahasa asing (Oxford, 1990). Kertas kajian ini membentangkan hasil kajian untuk menerokai strategi-strategi pembelajaran bahasa yang digunakan oleh 50 orang guru praperkhidmatan (23 lelaki, 27 perempuan) dari dua kumpulan pelajar kursus Sarjana Muda dalam Pendidikan (TESL) di Institut Perguruan Batu Lintang. Data tentang penggunaan strategi dikumpul melalui pentadbiran instrumen 50-item, iaitu "Strategy Inventory of Language Learning" (SILL) yang dihasilkan oleh Oxford (1990). Pada keseluruhannya, penggunaan strategi pembelajaran oleh guru-guru pra perkhidmatan dalam kedua-dua kumpulan adalah sederhana, di mana penggunaan strategi metakognitif paling kerap dilaporkan, diikuti dengan strategi-strategi kompensasi, kognitif, sosial dan ingatan. Strategi-strategi afektif paling kurang dilaporkan oleh kedua-dua kumpulan guru praperkhidmatan. Berbanding dengan Guru-guru praperkhidmatan perempuan melaporkan kekerapan mengguna strategi pembelajaran yang lebih tinggi berbanding dengan guru-guru praperkhidmatan lelaki. Sebagai kesimpulan, implikasi hasil kajian dan cadangan untuk kajian selanjutnya dibincangkan.*

**Kata kunci:** *pembelajaran bahasa, penggunaan strategi, TESL, guru praperkhidmatan*

## INTRODUCTION

Learning strategies and the factors that influence their use have received much attention in recent years since it became widely accepted that learning is a process during which the learner is actively involved and the role of the teacher is to facilitate that process. Strategy use is important as it affects the learners' motivational or affective state or the way in which they select, acquire, organize, or relate knowledge (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Learning strategies differ from teaching strategies in that the learner, not the teacher, exercises control over the operations of the activity. In the area of language learning, there has been much focus on these aspects too, particularly regarding second language (L2) acquisition. Over the past two decades, researchers (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992) have attempted to identify and categorize language learning strategies of good

language learners. Studies focused on identifying what good language learners report they do or are observed doing when they learn a second or foreign language. From early studies carried out by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) to taxonomies of strategies that were drawn up by Oxford (1990), to theories of language acquisition which incorporate strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), much work has been done in attempting to identify what might be good language learning strategies.

Language learning strategies are believed to play a vital role in learning a second language as they assist learners in mastering the forms and functions required for reception and production in the second language and thus affect achievement (Bialystok, 1979). There have been studies that study the relationship between language learning strategy use and proficiency as well as achievement (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). The use of appropriate language learning strategies improved proficiency and achievement and at the same time enabled students to take charge of their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction. In this regard, it is extremely important for teachers of a second or foreign language to identify the language learning strategies of their students. An understanding and awareness of learning strategies on the part of teachers as well as their students can provide valuable insights into the process of language learning. Teachers can then provide strategy instruction as well as guided practice to students who lack knowledge or skill in the use of certain language learning strategies.

A review of the literature available showed that in Malaysia there are relatively few documented studies that explored the language learning strategies that students use in learning English, the National Language (Bahasa Melayu), and foreign languages such as Arabic (Mohd. Amin Embi, Juriah Long, & Mohd. Isa Hamzah, 2001). Hence, there is a need for more studies to investigate into the language learning strategies of students in the local setting. This study aimed to advance research in this area through exploring the language learning strategies of B. Ed. (TESL) pre-service teachers. Specifically, this study aimed to find the answers to the following three questions:

- (i) What are the language learning strategies that pre-service teachers use?
- (ii) How often do pre-service teachers use these strategies?
- (iii) Do male and female pre-service teachers differ in their use of language learning strategies?

The findings of this study will prove useful to teacher educators in their efforts to help pre-service teachers improve their proficiency in English. Teacher educators should become more aware of their students' learning

strategies in order to orient teaching methods more appropriately. Guiding pre-service teachers in the use of appropriate learning strategies would lead to improved proficiency and achievement overall (Green & Oxford, 1995).

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Language Learning Strategies

Early research into language learning strategies was concerned with attempting to establish what good language learning strategies might be. Rubin (1975) suggested that good L2 learners (1) are willing and accurate guessers, (2) have a strong drive to communicate, (3) are often uninhibited, (4) are willing to practice opportunities, (5) monitor their speech as well as that of others, and (6) pay attention to meaning. Naiman, Frolich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) conducted interviews with adults in a major classroom study of learners of French as a second language and suggested that language learning strategies form only one part of a broader picture of what constitutes a 'good language learner'. They argue that further research needs "to study critically the different inventories of learning strategies and techniques and to develop an exhaustive list, clearly related to a learning model" (Naiman et al., 1978, p. 220). This challenge was taken up by O'Malley and his colleagues (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985a, 1985b) in their work with native speakers of Spanish. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) established that three types of strategies, namely metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective, were being used. Within the metacognitive category were those strategies which involve knowing about learning and controlling learning through planning, monitoring and evaluating learning activity, cognitive strategies included those strategies involving manipulation or transformation of the material to be learned, while social/affective strategies mainly involved the learner in communicative interaction with another person, for example, collaboration with peers and teachers in the learning process.

Oxford (1990) also developed a system of language learning strategies that is believed (Jones, 1998) to be more comprehensive and detailed than earlier classification models. She saw the aim of language learning strategies as being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. Oxford (1990) divided strategies into two major classes: direct and indirect. Direct strategies, which "involve direct learning and use of the subject matter, in this case a new language" are subdivided into three groups: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies; Indirect strategies, which "contribute indirectly but powerfully to learning" (pp. 11-12) are also subdivided into three groups: metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. According to Oxford (1990), memory strategies such as creating mental linkages and employing actions, aid in entering information into long-term memory and retrieving

information when needed for communication. Cognitive strategies, such as analyzing and reasoning, are used for forming, revising internal mental modes, receiving, and producing messages in the target language. Compensation strategies, such as guessing unknown words while listening and reading or using circumlocution in speaking and writing, are needed to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the language. Metacognitive strategies help learners exercise executive control planning, arranging, focusing, and evaluation of their own learning process. Affective strategies enable learners to control feelings, motivation, and attitudes related to language learning. Social strategies, such as asking questions and cooperation with others, facilitate interaction with others, often in a discourse situation. Logically, individuals will apply different strategies depending on their personality, cognitive style, and the task at hand.

Stern (1992, pp. 262-266) suggested that there are five main types of language learning strategies, namely management and planning strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative-experiential strategies, interpersonal strategies, and affective strategies. Management and planning strategies are related to the learner's intention to direct his own learning. Cognitive strategies are steps or operations used in learning or problem solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Communicative-experiential strategies, such as circumlocution, gesturing, paraphrasing or asking for repetition or explanation are techniques used by learners so as to keep a conversation going. Interpersonal strategies are those strategies learners use to monitor their own development and evaluate their own performance. Affective strategies are those strategies used to overcome negative feelings, frustration, anxiety, and self-consciousness when trying to use the language. The present study aimed to explore local pre-service teachers' use of language learning strategies categorized according to Oxford's (1990) system of classification.

### **Gender Differences in the Use of Language Learning Strategies**

Most previous research (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer, 1983) show that females reported of significantly greater use of language learning strategies than males did. Politzer (1983) found that females used social learning strategies significantly more than males did. Ehrman and Oxford (1989), in a study involving both students and their instructors, found that females reported significantly greater use of language learning strategies in four areas: general study strategies, functional practice strategies, strategies for searching for and communication of meaning, and self-management strategies. This female dominance in frequency and range of learning strategies was also observed in a study by Oxford and Nyikos (1989) involving 1,200 university students. They found that female learners used formal rule-related practice strategies, general study strategies and conversational input elicitation strategies more frequently than male learners

did. Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito and Sumrall (1993) also found that girls showed a number of differences from boys in terms of motivation, achievement, and frequency of strategy use in their study of factors affecting Japanese language achievement for high school students who were enrolled in the Japanese Satellite Program in the USA. However, there have also been studies (Kim, 1995; Oh, 1996; Wafa Abu Shmaris, 2003) that found no significant gender difference in language learning strategy use. Kim (1995) investigated the use of language learning strategies of Korean adult ESL learners and found no significant differences between males and females in the use of strategies. Wafa Abu Shmaris (2003) found no significant gender difference in language learning strategy use among university students in Palestine. A further aim of this study was to investigate gender differences in local pre-service teachers' use of language learning strategies.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 50 pre-service teachers (23 males, 27 females) of two different cohorts (henceforth referred to as Group 1 and Group 2) of pre-service teachers in the second and first year respectively of a 4-year Bachelor of Education (TESL) program in Batu Lintang Teachers' Institute. The age range of pre-service teachers in Group 1 (12 males, 13 females) was from 22 to 23 years (mean age = 22.12 years; SD = .33) while that of Group 2 (11 males, 14 females) was from 21 to 22 years (mean age = 21.08, SD = .28). These pre-service teachers were undergoing training to teach English in secondary school.

### Instrument

The instrument used for data collection in this quantitative survey study was Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The SILL is a widely used self-scoring survey and the structure is based on Oxford's classification system, whereby strategies are grouped into two types: direct (i.e., strategies that directly involve the target language) and indirect. These strategies are in turn divided into six categories, namely memory, cognitive, and compensation (direct) and metacognitive, affective, and social (indirect). Pre-service teachers were required to respond to the 50 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *never or almost never true for me* to *always or almost always true for me*. Green and Oxford (1995) quote reliability of various forms of SILL using Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency, as .93 to .98. Reliability of SILL for the two groups of pre-service teachers in this study were .89 (Group 1) and .77 (Group 2). The content validity for SILL based on independent raters was .99 (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

## **Procedure**

Pre-service teachers were informed that they were involved in a study on the learning strategies they use in learning English. The instrument was administered by the researcher in this study to the two groups within the same week. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers. What was important was that they responded according to how well the statements described how they felt or what they did. When asked whether they had any difficulty in understanding any of the statements in the SILL, all of them said they had no problems doing so. Most of the pre-service teachers completed the inventory in 30 minutes.

## **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data collected. Results regarding the use of language learning strategies are presented in the form of means, standard deviations, and rank order of usage of each category of language learning strategies.

# **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

## **Pre-service Teachers' Usage of Language Learning Strategies**

This study set out to investigate the choice and frequency of usage of language learning strategies of two groups of B. Ed. (TESL) pre-service teachers. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and rank order of usage of each category of strategies for each group of pre-service teachers. Overall frequency of use of both groups was moderate, with Group 1 pre-service teachers reporting higher frequency of use of language learning strategies ( $M = 3.42$ ) than Group 2 ( $M = 3.31$ ) pre-service teachers.

Perusal of the means and rank order reveals that pre-service teachers reported using metacognitive strategies more than the other five strategies. This shows that pre-service teachers do exercise control of their own cognition through planning, arranging, focusing and evaluating their own learning process. Group 1 pre-service teachers reported of high usage of compensation strategies (ranked second) such as guessing the meaning of unknown words while listening or reading or using circumlocution in speaking and writing. For Group 2 pre-service teachers, however, the use of social strategies surpassed that of compensation strategies, which was ranked third in order of usage. Group 2 pre-service teachers appeared to seek the help of others or cooperate more with others when learning English. For them, resorting to compensation strategies to aid in comprehension and production purposes was ranked third. The use of cognitive strategies, which involves analysis and reasoning during learning, was ranked third for Group 1 and fourth for Group 2 pre-service teachers. Meanwhile, for both groups of pre-service teachers, memory strategies and

affective strategies were not so often mentioned (ranked fifth and sixth). This finding suggests that pre-service teachers made relatively less effort to carry out deep processing and commit to memory what they have learned. Pre-service teachers in both groups also employed relatively less affective strategies such as control of their feelings, motivation and attention, that would enhance their learning of English. As the above comparison shows, pre-service teachers of both groups reported of quite similar choice and frequency of use of the six categories of learning strategies.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Rank Order of Usage of Language Learning Strategies

Category	Mean		Rank Order of Usage	
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 1	Group 2
Memory strategies	3.20 (.60)	3.03 (.41)	5	5
Cognitive strategies	3.48 (.45)	3.40 (.33)	3	4
Compensation strategies	3.64 (.57)	3.42 (.64)	2	3
Metacognitive strategies	3.77 (.55)	3.65 (.70)	1	1
Affective strategies	3.01 (.62)	2.92 (.74)	6	6
Social strategies	3.42 (.60)	3.44 (.54)	4	2
Overall	3.42 (.40)	3.31 (.27)		

Note. Standard Deviations are in parentheses

### **Gender Differences in the Use of Language Learning Strategies**

Another aim of this study was to investigate into gender differences in language learning strategy use. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of language learning strategy use of males and females.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Language Learning Strategy Use by Gender

Category	Group 1		Group 2	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Memory strategies	3.25 (.54)	3.15 (.67)	2.95 (.38)	3.09 (.44)
Cognitive strategies	3.30 (.50)	3.65 (.33)	3.34 (.30)	3.45 (.37)
Compensation strategies	3.51 (.58)	3.76 (.56)	3.13 (.44)	3.64 (.69)
Metacognitive strategies	3.62 (.47)	3.91 (.60)	3.73 (.54)	3.59 (.82)
Affective strategies	2.83 (.63)	3.18 (.58)	3.06 (.43)	2.80 (.91)
Social strategies	3.25 (.40)	3.58 (.72)	3.29 (.44)	3.57 (.59)
Overall	3.30 (.41)	3.53 (.37)	3.25 (.23)	3.36 (.30)

Note. Standard Deviations are in parentheses

For Group 1 pre-service teachers, females appeared to report of greater use of five of the six language learning strategies namely, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Males only surpassed females in the use of memory strategies. Overall, females ( $M = 3.53$ ) reported of greater use of language learning strategies than males ( $M = 3.30$ ) did. For Group 2 pre-service teachers, females reported of more frequent usage of four of the six categories of language learning strategies, namely memory, cognitive, compensation and social strategies. Male pre-service teachers, however, reported of greater use of metacognitive and affective strategies than females did. Overall, females ( $M = 3.36$ ) reported of greater use of language learning strategies than males ( $M = 3.25$ ) did. The above findings concur with that of researchers such Ehrman and Oxford (1989), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), and Politzer (1983), who found that there was significant gender difference in the use of language learning strategies. Females usually surpassed males in the frequency and range of language learning strategies used.

## CONCLUSION

### Summary

The findings in this study show that the two groups of B. Ed. (TESL) pre-service teachers reported moderate usage of the six categories of language learning strategies in Oxford's (1990) system of language learning strategies. Generally, pre-service teachers in both groups appeared to have quite similar choice and frequency of use of the six categories of strategies. Both groups of pre-service teachers reported of greater use of metacognitive strategies and relatively low usage of memory and affective strategies. On the whole, female pre-service teachers reported of greater use of language learning strategies than males did.

### Implications

A number of important practical implications can be drawn from the findings in this study. The findings show that the two language learning strategies less often mentioned were memory strategies (ranked 5) and affective strategies (ranked 6). Memory strategies, which involve creating mental linkages and images, help learners to encode and store what they have learned in long-term memory and retrieve information when needed. This strategy is important for pre-service teachers if they want to commit to memory the meaning of new words and language rules they have learned. Pre-service teachers should be encouraged to be more diligent in improving storage and retrieval of information during the learning process. Teacher educators could do this by encouraging them to find out the meaning of new words, make an effort to remember them, and apply and revise what they have learned through suitable learning activities. They should also be encouraged to employ suitable strategies to commit to memory and retrieve language rules they have learned.

The findings also indicate that affective strategies were least often reported. The use of affective strategies is important in helping pre-service teachers regulate feelings and attitude towards learning English. Teacher educators could perhaps address this problem through affective strategy instruction. Pre-service teachers may not be aware of the need to regulate their emotions during learning. Steps can be taken to alleviate stress through relaxation activities or instruction on stress management. Oxford (1990) suggested three types of affective strategies that can be used to regulate learner attitudes, motivation, and emotions. Among these are strategies for anxiety reduction (using progressive relaxation and deep breathing exercises, music, and laughter), for self-encouragement (making positive statements, taking risks wisely, giving self-rewards), and for monitoring emotions (listening to the body, completing a checklist, writing a language learning diary, and discussing feelings with peers). Kondo and Yang (2004), in their study involving Japanese students, put forward 72 different tactics, which were clustered into five strategy-groups namely preparation,

relaxation, positive thinking, peer-seeking and resignation, to help lower students' levels of anxiety. Previous research (Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1998; Moskowitz, 1999) show that affective strategy instruction enhanced performance and improved students' attitude towards language learning.

Some of the pre-service teachers, particularly the male pre-service teachers, may need instruction concerning what language learning strategies to use in order to improve their proficiency in English. There are studies that show that strategy instruction can influence students' choice and usage of language learning strategies and result in males and females showing roughly equivalent though different strategy strengths (Lee, 1994; 2003; Oxford, Nyikos & Ehrman, 1988). As these pre-service teachers are going to be future teachers of English in school, the need for them to know and practice the use of language learning strategies cannot be over emphasized.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Future researchers using the SILL could perhaps substantiate their findings through conducting interviews with pre-service teachers to find out the reasons for their choice and frequency of use of language learning strategies. Interviews could also be used to probe into pre-service teachers' knowledge of language learning strategies, their beliefs about language learning, and their attitude towards learning English. It would be interesting to gain insights into their self-beliefs (for example language anxiety and language self-efficacy) regarding learning English and how this is related to their use of language learning strategies. According to Bernat (2006) motivation to learn a language can be influenced by self-beliefs such as self-concept, self-confidence, anxiety, expectancy and the need to achieve. Anxiety and self-efficacy beliefs have been found to influence the learners' motivation to learn, their performance, and their perseverance in the face of failure both elsewhere (Benson, 2001; Bernat, 2006; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Wolters & Rosenthal, 2000) and locally (Wong, 2005, 2007).

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