

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0: Overview

As mentioned in chapter one, language learning strategies are not only significant to students, but also to language instructors and curriculum designers to understand how these two groups of learners used them to study a second language. Therefore, chapter two mainly focuses on a review of related literature in language learning strategies. To understand the context of previous studies, a background of related theories and researches of this study is provided. The first section of this review presents individual differences of ESL or EFL learners. The review also includes definitions and concepts of language learning strategies (LLS), past studies on LLS, and factors that influence the selection of LLS. The gap in research concludes this chapter.

2.1: Individual Differences

Each individual is different from another in many ways. They are different in terms of age, gender, personalities, motivational levels, learning attitudes, learning styles, learning strategies, nationalities, first language, beliefs, knowledge and earlier learning experiences. These individual differences may influence the way students tackle their studies. As a result of these differences, the importance of language learning has been emphasised to the learners (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Approaches to the teaching and learning of a second language

have been continuously developed and improved covering grammar, translation, audio-lingual aids, community language learning (Curran, 1972), suggestopedia (Lozanov, 1979), the silent way (Gattegno, 1972), total physical response (Asher, 1977), the natural approach (Krashen, 1982) to learning styles, learning strategies (Rubin & Stern, 1975; Chamot & O'Malley, 1987; Oxford, 1990) and communicative language teaching (Higgs & Clifford, 1982). Since then, many researches research on individual differences have been conducted in the academic world to explore the learning process of students of second language (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Yang, 1999; Wharton 2000, Shmais, 2003; Arokiasamy, 2005 and Chang, Liu & Lee, 2007). These studies reveal that age, first language influence, nationality, language beliefs and knowledge of target culture, previous learning experience, motivation and attitude as well as language styles and strategies have affected language learning. The following sections will highlight the interplay of all these various factors that will eventually result in the success or failure of students of foreign language.

2.1.1: Age

Age plays a vital role in the acquisition of second language skills. In the cognitive domain, adult learners often develop greater concentration and ability for rote learning in the study of second language (Brown, 2000). They use rote learning more often than younger learners to tackle specific language tasks such as building up their vocabulary. In addition, Brown (2000) observes that adult

learners employ rote learning only for short-term memory. However, younger students seem to be better than adults at acquiring second language skills the natural way, because they are good at imitating words or phrases.

No doubt, human beings are emotional. For this reason, age may influence their emotional state. Individual ego also comes into play as a student progresses in his bid to acquire mastery of a second language. Due to their age and maturity, adults tend to have a large ego. This trait may pose some difficulties to the adults learning the target language (Guiora *et. al.* 1972). When adults are placed together with younger students in a second language classroom, the latter do not show signs of nervousness or fear over the use of language forms. According to Brown (2000), "it is no wonder, then, that the acquisition of a new language ego is an enormous undertaking not only for young adolescents but also for an adult who has grown comfortable and secure in his or her own identity and who possesses inhibitions that serve as a wall of defensive protection around the ego" (p.65). In other words, due to their age and ego, adults fear to reveal their mistakes.

Zhao and Morgan (2004) argue in their survey that age should be taken into consideration in the teaching approach. According to them, children, teenagers and adults have different neurological, cognitive and psychological responses to the study of second language. Children are generally better learners, but teenagers and adults have developed stronger cognitive ability and self-discipline in acquiring or mastering the language. Visual and sensory experience

in the form of flashcards, language board games, pictorial dictionaries, puzzles and objects enable children to speed up their language learning. Therefore, Zhao and Morgan (2004) suggest that children's experience and characteristics need to be carefully considered in designing an appropriate curriculum. Adolescents, on the other hand, are learning to take charge of their direction. In other words, teenagers are starting to develop mature attitudes. Zhao and Morgan (2004) also argue that adult learners have stronger cognitive skills, better learning strategies, greater learning experience or good study habits, and belief and knowledge, which enable them to solve problems easily when undertaking language tasks.

Besides the age factor, first language is also instrumental in aiding a student to acquire second or foreign language skills. This difference will be discussed in the following section.

2.1.2: First Language

The role of first language in foreign language learning is to communicate meaning and content. Second and foreign language learners use their first language to compensate for the missing information or gaps in the target language. Nation (2003) in his survey argues that first language plays a vital role in helping learners gain knowledge to attain a higher level of proficiency in the second language. According to Nation (2003), learners will revert to using their first language to conduct small discussions whenever they are unable to perform the language tasks.

When learning a second or foreign language, most students tend to look out for the best tools to help them. Thus, the dictionary is the most popularly used tool among the learners to look up for the meanings of unknown or difficult words in the second language. Since a lot of words are borrowed from the English language, Nation (2003) argues that using dictionaries encourages learners to notice the relationship between the original and borrowed words. This way, the learners will be able to expand their vocabulary effectively. But, on the flip side, placing too much reliance on the English dictionary may hinder second or foreign language learners from mastering the English language on their own.

Nation (2003) further comments that first language should be regarded as a beneficial aid, but it should not be excessively used. In conclusion, first language does play a part in helping students acquire at least some rudimentary knowledge of English in the sense that they can resort to the use of their mother tongue to understand the meanings of words or phrases in English. The following section explains the influence of nationalities of each individual in their quest for English mastery.

2.1.3: Nationality

The nationality of a student also has a bearing on his studies. Each nationality is influenced by different cultural backgrounds (Altan, 2004). For instance, Asian learners tend to prefer rote learning or memorisation and rule-oriented strategies (Politzer and McGroarty (1985). Similarly, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) discovered that Taiwanese students were more structured, analytic, metacognitively oriented and had higher memorisation skills than other groups in Oxford's study (1994).

However, Chinese participants in Altan's study (2004) proved otherwise. These learners no longer employed the traditional method of memorising a target language. Altan (2004) also discovered that Turkish participants would always relate what they already knew to the new things they have learnt in English more often than the Chinese. In addition, Hungarian participants tried not to translate word by word compared to the Turkish participants.

The education system of a country also plays a part in shaping a nation. Gao (2005) found that two mainland Chinese English learners were extremely exam-oriented. The learners felt that the more exams they took, the better they were in English. Hou (2008) also showed that the Chinese students were drilled to read and listen in order to pass their examinations. In short, the nationality of a student is somewhat related to his belief and knowledge, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.1.4: Learners' Belief and Knowledge of Target Culture

In the context of second or foreign language learning, the beliefs held by learners are related to the nature of the language study, the effectiveness of learning strategies, language aptitude, age and gender factors and others (Bernat, 2006). In other words, beliefs and knowledge of certain issues have the tendency to influence the attitude and motivation of the learners. Bernat (2006) studied the beliefs held by learners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at an Australian university. The researcher found that the EAP learners believed that language learning was difficult, and a grammar-based approach was more effective than a communicative-based one.

Although language learning and teaching techniques have evolved rapidly with various techniques and strategies, some language learners still believe in employing traditional methods like rote learning, and grammar-based translation. Li (2004) discovered that Chinese EFL learners put more faith in exam-oriented by using memory strategies. They preferred to repeat their lessons several times, and rely on a dictionary or a teacher to ensure accuracy of meanings. They believed that by using the right words or finding the correct answers to questions, they would score higher marks in the exams. In short, the learners' belief and knowledge are somewhat related to prior learning experiences, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.1.5: Prior Learning Experience

Different individuals have different prior learning experiences. For instance, Chuo and Yen (2005) found that almost all Taiwanese EFL learners began learning English in a private language institute during their pre-school and primary school years. This early learning experience would better prepare them for entrance examinations in high schools and colleges.

In their early English learning experience, drilling, grammar instruction and test-taking abilities became their ultimate focus. Early exposure to a second language enables learners to get acquainted with different types of methods and pedagogy. Chuo and Yen (2005) further discovered that the Taiwanese participants had positive learning experiences in their junior or senior high schools. The learners had dedicated teachers (some of them were even native speakers) and a well-designed curriculum. Furthermore, nearly half of the participants had overseas learning experience where they were provided with an authentic learning environment to practise the language.

Hence, prior learning experiences have given the learners opportunity to explore different learning environment which enable them to learn the language faster and in a natural way. According to Hou (2008), the Chinese EFL learners had more interaction with the native English speakers when they studied in the English-speaking country. This learning experience had given them the chance to practise the language in a natural way. This prior learning experience also

depends on the individual's learning attitude and motivational level. A motivated learner will grab the opportunity to practise more, whereas a less driven student learner will not do so. The following section explains the different motivational level and learning attitude of each individual.

2.1.6: Motivational Level and Learning Attitude

Lambert and Gardner (1972) divides motivation into two categories: instrumental and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation involves achieving goals like seeking better career opportunities and getting into good universities. Integrative motivation, on the other hand, describes learners who wish to be involved or integrated into the culture of the second or foreign language. Motivational levels differ from one individual to another due to many factors.

In Olah's study (2006), the researcher found that Japanese high school students had higher instrumental motivation than university students, because of their strong instrumental motivation to pass the entrance examinations. Similarly, Chinese students were found to have very strong instrumental motivation to pass the English examinations, as reported in Gao's study (2005).

They know the importance of mastering English language as it would help them secure future employment. An individual who possesses a positive learning attitude will eventually succeed in learning or mastering the language. This positive attitude helps to increase the level of motivation of the individual learner. As Gao (2005) reported in his study, the two Chinese learners possessed different learning attitudes. One learner was very committed to her language learning, whereas the other showed less commitment. In short, motivation and learning attitudes are interrelated, because they depend on each other to speed up the language learning process. The following section elaborates the learning styles and personalities of language learners.

2.1.7: Learning Styles and Personalities

Brown (2000) comments that language learning strategies are often related to language learning styles. “Style” refers to the preferences of an individual that influence their choice of language learning strategies. In addition, “styles” represent the characteristics or personalities of an individual, which differentiate them from others in terms of visual, auditory and reflective styles (Brown, 2000). Learning styles might be related to cognitive, affective, and physiological attributes that might influence how language learners respond to the learning environment, and communicate with others (Keefe, 1979). In other words, learning styles refer to an individual’s natural habitual actions.

In this review, three learning styles are studied: field independence, ambiguity tolerance, and visual and auditory styles. Field independence is categorised into two types: field independence (FI) and field dependence (FD). Language learners, who are able to recognise or identify a specific, relevant item or factor in a context independently, have FI style. On the contrary, FD refers to learners who are dependent on the total field and cannot easily perceive some parts of it. They can identify the total field as a unified whole (Brown, 2000). As Sharp (2004) discovered, sensing was preferred by the Chinese students to memorise facts or English words for success in school exams or university entrance. This means the learners possessed FI styles in mastering the language. In other words, individuals who possess more FI are likely to be more independent, confident and competitive than FD individuals. FD learners are more socialised, emphatic and perceptive of others' feelings and thoughts.

Brown (2000) concludes that "FI is closely related to classroom learning that involves analysis, attention to details, and mastering of exercises, drills, and other focused activities" (p.115). FD learners, on the other hand, "will be successful in learning the communicative aspects of a second language" (Brown, 2000; p.116). Some people might be both highly FI and highly FD, depending on the context.

Ambiguity tolerance is a learning style that concerns the learners' willingness to accept or tolerate new ideas or concepts that may go against their beliefs and norms in learning a new language. This learning style has its advantages and disadvantages. According to Brown (2000), successful language learners are usually tolerant of ambiguity, because they usually think about or accept a number of creative and innovative ways to use a second language. However, too much tolerance of ambiguity may affect the language learners' receptiveness to every possible idea or concept that may interfere with their cognitive organisation. Brown (2000) also expresses his concern over rote learning (memorisation) by language learners. As a result, this intolerance of ambiguity may restrict their creativity and cognitive skills in learning the target language.

Lastly, the most popular dimension of learning styles in a formal classroom setting is visual and auditory style. Visual learners have preference for reading, studying diagrams or charts, while auditory learners choose to listen to lectures or watch movies or television programmes. Successful or effective language learners usually employ both visual and auditory styles. Nevertheless, what differentiates successful learners is their preference towards each style. Zakaria and Abdullah (2006) discovered that both male and female language learners preferred visual learning style. The university students were used to view their notes on the whiteboard, textbooks, and make notes while listening to English lectures.

In summary, individual differences often influence their choice of learning strategies. This is because each individual applies different strategies, depending on their cognitive style, personality, age, gender, and motivation. These language learning strategies are discussed in Section 2.2.

2.2: Language Learning Strategies (LLSs)

Language learning strategies (LLSs) differ from learning styles. “Styles” are characteristics or preferences that distinguish each learner while “strategies” are specific “attacks” that are used in solving a language task or problem (Brown, 2000). In this section, the researcher explains various definitions given to LLSs, the classifications of LLSs and what constitutes a good language learner in the following sub-sections.

2.2.1: Various Definitions of LLSs

Language learning strategies (LLSs) have been defined in many ways. The most general definition of “LLSs” is that in which ESL or EFL learners use a specific way or technique to learn English. However, this general perspective is insufficient to support studies on LLSs. This is because many researchers have defined LLSs as various methods that are used by language learners in acquiring language skills (Wenden, 1983; Dansereau, 1985; Chamot & O’Malley, 1986, 1987; Oxford, 1990; Thompson & Rubin, 1996, Brown, 2000). For this reason,

different researchers adopt various terms and concepts in defining LLSs (Oxford & Crookall, 1989). The following definitions of LLSs are discussed.

Oxford (1989) defines LLSs as specific techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing their language skills. Students use certain techniques to learn the language with the aim of achieving the objectives of the language skills. Oxford (1990) sees strategies as vital for language learning “because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which are essential for developing communicative competence” (p.1). Ten years later, Nunan (1999) defines “strategies” as mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use the language.

Hence, it is easier to describe LLSs as various types of ways of learning a language. Nevertheless, different language skills require different LLSs. Needless to say, EFL learners choose a particular strategy that they feel is effective for them not only to learn, but also to acquire or master the English Language. Therefore, every language task has at least one strategy that the learners have in mind.

Employing the appropriate LLSs in learning the language determines the levels of proficiency of the learners. For this reason, language learning strategies play an important role in influencing the ESL or EFL learners’ language proficiency, or the approach in which the learners choose to understand new

knowledge (Weinstein and Mayer, 1986). Weinstein and Mayer suggest that learning strategies are “behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages during learning and that they are intended to influence the learner’s encoding process” (p.315). In addition, language learning strategies help learners facilitate the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information, and also self-motivation (Chang, Liu, & Lee, 2007).

Choosing LLSs depends on the learners’ belief and knowledge of the subject as each individual is unique. Hence, the uniqueness of each individual has prompted him or her to adopt different views in using those strategies which are appropriate for promoting effective language learning. These definitions of LLSs focus more on the learners’ intention and choice of using language learning strategies. Classifications of LLSs are discussed in the following section: 2.2.2.

2.2.2: Classifications of LLSs

Oxford (1990) divides strategies into two major classes: direct and indirect. Direct strategies involve direct learning and the use of the subject matter and are subdivided into three groups: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. On the other hand, indirect strategies contribute indirectly to learning and are subdivided into three groups: metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Below are the different types of strategies as described by Oxford:

Memory strategy : It is used to create mental linkages, employ actions, store information into long-term memory and retrieve it when needed for communication purposes.

Cognitive strategy : A strategy that is employed for analysing and reasoning such as forming and revising internal mental modes, and receiving and producing messages in the target language.

Compensation strategy: A method that is used to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the target language by guessing unknown words while reading and listening or using other words in speaking and writing.

Metacognitive strategy: It is employed to help learners exercise 'executive control' through planning, arranging, focusing, and evaluation of their own learning process.

Affective strategy : In this method, learners learn to control their feelings, motivations, and attitudes related to language learning.

Social strategy : Learners use this method to ask questions and to cooperate with others, and facilitate interaction with others in application of language tasks.

Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is used in this field of research, and it has been translated into many languages as a research tool to help researchers do their surveys efficiently. SILL is in the form of questionnaire that identifies the frequency of use of strategies – high, medium or low. The following section discusses how good language learners use language learning strategies.

2.2.3: The Good Language Learners

Language learning strategies are often associated with good language learners. Many researchers have discovered that successful language learners have used more and better learning strategies than weaker ones. Earlier studies were aimed at finding out the behaviours of successful language learners with a view to teaching those traits to others. Therefore, good language learners are often defined in terms of personality, beliefs, styles and strategies.

Rubin and Thompson (1982) suggest that good learners possess specific characteristics such as self-reliance (they can get things done on their own), ability to organise information about language, are creative (they will experiment with various modes of learning the language), and find ways of practising the language skills inside and outside the classroom. Hence, a good language student takes charge of his or her own strategies in the advancement of his knowledge and skills.

Oxford (1989) suggests that good language learners use strategies in six broad categories: metacognitive, affective, social, memory, cognitive and compensatory. Good language learners are often identified as successful learners who adopt special strategies in learning the language.

In the search for methods to understand the use of LLSs, numerous studies were carried out over the past few decades on the effectiveness of learners using a variety of strategies to acquire language competence. In order to develop effective listening skills, one needs to use specific techniques to identify the main ideas, and details of the conversations. Monitoring, elaborating, and inferencing were used to develop effective listening skills (O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper, 1989). Besides, developing effective reading skills requires one to identify the main ideas or gist of the stories, and to guess or predict the unknown words by using contextual clues from the passage.

Alseweed's (2000) found that training students to use word-solving strategies help to improve their proficiency in vocabulary. A recent research (White, 2006) showed that training Japanese university EFL students to use strategies such as summarising and "word attack" did not produce significant results in their performance of multiple-choice reading test.

It is believed that the level of proficiency of a learner of second or foreign language will invariably affect his choice of employing LLSs. In 1985, O'Malley and colleagues did a study on a group of intermediate-level ESL students to find out what strategies were employed in their learning. They discovered that the group used more metacognitive than cognitive strategies. A few years later, Goh and Foong (1997) found that metacognitive strategies were most frequently used by Chinese students who enrolled in a six-month intensive English programme at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. They noted the mistakes made in the English lessons and used that information to help the students improve their language proficiency.

The use of language learning strategies changes when the proficiency level increases. Su (2005) found that EFL technological and vocational college students in Taiwan used social learning strategies most frequently in learning the target language. This is quite similar to the findings of Munasamy's study (2006). The researcher also discovered that social strategies were more popular with students when communicating with their peers in English.

Chamot (2005) was of the opinion that successful language learners were mentally active learners who practised communicating in the language frequently and who constantly monitored their language comprehension. They would also keep asking questions to get clarifications from their teachers or peers. These characteristics of good language learners show that the learners use

communicative approaches to enhance their language learning. They believe communication is one of the keys to develop their overall language skills.

Effective language learners are resourceful and diligent. They will try out whatever strategies that may be appropriate for them to acquire language skills. Arokiasamy (2005) found out that a good language learner was more proficient in English than a less proficient one, because the former was more resourceful in honing his skills such as strengthening his vocabulary. The researcher also argued that effective learners possessed the cognitive and academic skills to tackle their studies. These two skills are crucial for students who wish to pursue their higher education in which English is used as a medium of instruction. Thus, most of them appeared to work independently without consulting their teachers and friends. Choosing appropriate strategies often depend on factors that influence the learners. These factors are discussed in Section 2.3.

2.3: Past Studies on Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies have been studied for several years (Rubin, 1975, Stern, 1975, and Naiman et. al, 1975; O'Malley et.al., 1985a; Oxford, 1989; Su, 2005; Chang, Liu & Lee, 2007, Prakongchati, 2007; and Wu, 2008).

Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman et. al, (1975) studied what “good language learners” actually did when studying a foreign language. Effective strategies used by more proficient learners were recommended for use by weaker or unsuccessful students.

Su (2005) did a survey on language learning strategies utilised by Taiwanese technological and vocational college students and their self-perception of their progress. The study found that social strategies were frequently employed by these learners who perceived their proficiency level as average. In short, students who have a high perception of their English proficiency tended to use more learning strategies.

Another study was carried out by Chang, Liu & Lee (2007) on language learning strategies employed by college EFL learners in Taiwan. In contrast with Su's study (2005), the researchers found that the learners adopted more compensation strategies. In addition, the relationship between learning strategies and gender was also analysed. According to their results, the female learners used more learning strategies than their male counterparts. The results also revealed

that most female students who majored in humanities and social science rather than in other academic fields frequently used learning strategies.

Prakongchati (2007) studied the language learning strategies used by Thai university freshmen and other factors like proficiency levels, gender, learning experience, fields of study, and types of academic programmes. The learners made only average use of learning strategies, and among the factors, only gender status was found to be slightly related to students' choice of strategy.

Wu (2008), on the other hand, discovered that both higher and lower proficiency EFL students adopted compensation strategies more than other strategies. Furthermore, the higher proficiency EFL students used strategies more than the less capable ones, especially cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies.

In summary, many factors have been identified as contributors to the choice of learning strategies by the language learners. These factors are discussed in the following section.

2.4: Factors that Influence the Choice of Language Learning Strategies

Many factors have been identified that influenced learners in the selection of appropriate language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). These range from gender, cultural background, attitudes and beliefs to motivation, types of tasks, age, and learning styles.

The gender link is one of the most commonly researched areas in language learning (Lee, 2003; Shmais, 2003; Chang, Liu & Lee, 2007). A common thread that ran through these three studies was that generally female learners were more likely to use language learning strategies than male students. This factor supports previous researches which concluded that women used more language learning strategies than men, depending on instruction or learning tasks (Oxford, 1989).

Motivation is also one important ingredient in a successful outcome of language learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Language learners, whose motivational levels are higher, are most likely to have a strong determination to achieve their goals. The learners' cultural background and language learning experience are taken into account in the choice of suitable learning strategies. Learning by rote is frequently used not only by Asian students, but also by Palestinian students who learn the language in isolated fragments (Shmais, 2003).

In a recent research by Lee (2003), compensation strategies were found to be most frequently used by Korean junior high school students who were learning English as a second language. The Korean students overcame limitations in speaking and writing by using linguistic and non-linguistic clues. According to Lee (2003), a significant difference was identified between boys and girls in the use of strategies. Female students, in general, employed more language learning strategies than the male students. The girl specifically used more memory, metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies than the opposite sex.

This same conclusion was arrived at in another recent research done in Taiwan. Chang, Liu, & Lee (2007) found that there was a great difference between female and male learners of EFL in a college in the selection of strategies. The female learners adopted more strategies than the male students in three of six categories on the SILL: cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies.

2.5: The Research Gap

However, some learners may not really know what strategies they use or probably they cannot describe their strategies (Nyikos, 1987). One major issue in language learning strategies is the level of learners' consciousness when using them (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). This finding is in accord with the findings of researches done by Lee (2003), and Chang, Liu and Lee (2007) respectively in Asian countries. Thus, some of these learners might not be aware of the quality of

their strategies they chose while others might use a large number of strategies that lacked coherence.

Lee (2003) urged learners of English as a foreign language to be conscious of the kind of strategies they choose. He advised them to select the ideal ones for application in language tasks. The researcher's argument was supported by Chang, Liu, & Lee (2007), who pointed out that not all students were aware of how to use learning strategies even though they knew the existence of such strategies. There were also students who really did not know there were strategies for language learning.

Finally, the significance of the findings would be useful in exploring other factors or reasons that EFL learners of this current research who might have the same concerns which was to be unaware of the language learning strategies.

2.6: Conclusion

To sum up, the researchers have not really reached a consensus on the most important strategies learners should adopt when studying a second or foreign language. The teachers themselves are more interested in the end results than in the learning strategies, and they probably spend less time talking to the learners about their language learning process (Hosenfeld, 1976). It is, therefore, good to find out the types of strategies employed by the learners and the factors that

influenced their language learning process (Hismanoglu, 2000). By doing so, it will help teachers or language instructors to increase their teaching efforts (Kinoshita, 2003). The following chapter explains the research methodology and how the data was collected.