

A narrative approach: English learning strategies amongst EFL students

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Abstract. Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) are trusted to be an influential factor affecting the students' success in English learning. Among the myriads researchers have conducted study on this issue through various perspectives. Inspired from three successful language students, this current study was carried out to highlight the students' attitudes towards the role of learning strategies, the recommended and non-recommended strategies in the process of learning, and the other contributing factors affecting the EFL learning. To fill the burgeoning need of the study, a narrative approach was undertaken to bring the study on the issue. Likewise, a series of question were addressed to reach the goal of the study through an open-ended interview. Subsequently, the result of interview was transcribed and interpreted through thematically analyses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It uncovered that the participated students have positive attitudes towards English learning strategies. They enlightened several good strategies that shape their English skills, such as utilizing YouTube video, building a high confidence, and practicing English in a single language. On the other hand, they also put in the picture that memorization became the most common ineffective strategy. As the last finding, the students perceived that technology, learning environment, society, and personal condition are other factors boosting the achievement in English learning. The finding of the study presents the practical benefit to the practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

Keywords. *Language Learning Strategies, English as Foreign Language students, University Level.*

Abstrak. Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa diyakini menjadi faktor yang mempengaruhi kesuksesan pembelajar dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Sudah banyak penelitian yang meneliti tentang topik tersebut melalui berbagai diskusi. Terinspirasi dari tiga pembelajar bahasa yang telah sukses, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui persepsi mahasiswa terkait strategi pembelajaran bahasa, strategi yang dianjurkan dan tidak dianjurkan dalam proses belajar bahasa Inggris serta faktor lain yang mempengaruhi kesuksesan mereka dalam belajar bahasa Inggris. Untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut, sebuah pendekatan narasi digunakan. Berbagai pertanyaan juga ditujukan kepada mahasiswa melalui wawancara terbuka. Selanjutnya, hasil dari wawancara disalin dan diterjemahkan menggunakan analisa yang sistematis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa yang berpartisipasi menunjukkan sikap positif terhadap penggunaan strategi belajar. Mereka menjelaskan bahwa strategi yang tepat dapat meningkatkan kemampuan berbahasa Inggris, contoh strateginya ialah memanfaatkan video yang ada pada *YouTube*, membangun kepercayaan diri yang tinggi dan cukup mempraktikan bahasa Inggris tanpa berpikir dalam bahasa kedua. Disisi lain, mereka juga menjelaskan bahwa menghafal menjadi strategi yang paling tidak efektif untuk diterapkan dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Sebagai temuan akhir, mahasiswa juga menambahkan bahwa teknologi, lingkungan belajar, masyarakat dan kondisi pembelajar menjadi faktor lain yang mempengaruhi kesuksesan dalam belajar bahasa Inggris. Tentunya hasil dari penelitian ini memberi manfaat praktis untuk para praktisi, peneliti dan pembuat kebijakan.

Kata kunci: *Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa, Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing, Tingkat Pendidikan Tinggi.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Successful Language Learning Strategies

Coinciding with the positive attitude towards language learning strategies (LLSs) research among the practitioners and researchers, the initial theory of strategies is suggested to be the guidelines for good language learners. Rubin (1975) emerges that good language learners tend (1) to build a well-guessed, (2) to be initiative in communication, (3) to be no inhibition in making mistakes, (4) to be aware of pattern and communication, (5) to practice, (6) to monitor the progress, and (7) to focus on meaning.

In assisting the less successful students, Gerami & Baighlou (2011) postulated that teachers should focus on giving less successful students more opportunities to put into practice language in the classroom. It is for the reason that successful students are aware of using the strategies more frequently. Thus, the teachers are supposed to emerge the strategies-based instruction in the classroom so the students know how to practice language in the most effective way. Numerous of related research have also been freshly geared (Zhang, et al., 2019; Ngo, 2019; Guo, et al., 2018; Cohen, et al., 2018; Hakan, et al., 2015).

The present study spotlights the EFL students' interest on how they perceive the learning through LLSs, the recommended and non-recommended strategies in language learning, and the other contributing factors that influence the LLSs development.

1.2 Learning Environment

Based on the theory of socio-cultural, learning environment becomes one of the most prominent roles in learning strategies orientation (Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Huang & Andrews (2010) deliberately test the influence of learning environment and context on the 47 secondary students in China. The result asserted that students' exam was typically environmentally oriented.

Furthermore, Hughes & Qi (2011), Rumfola (2017), McDonald & Hershman (2010) summarized that students will be comfortable in the learning process with no threatening atmosphere. It means that environment influences the students learning

From these results, it can be drawn that the learning atmosphere and the interpersonal relationship between student and student or teacher and student determine the goal of language learning through the learning strategies preferences in the process of language acquisition.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach and aimed at documenting the students' account of learning strategies as well as uncovering untold stories as regards the other contributing factors affecting the students' development of LLSs (Clandinin, 2013).

The participants of the study were the third semester of three pre-service teachers who are attending college and taking English major at Universitas Islam Malang. They were interviewed through open-ended procedures and embarked with a question, "What is your view about language strategies in English learning?", "Whenever you fruitfully complete a task in language learning, what is the main factors determined your accomplishment?", "What kind of strategies do you maintain and believe to be the key of your success in language learning?", "What are several ineffective strategies that might bind your success so far?", and "What are other contributing factors that build a success in English learning?".

Afterwards, the talking data were transcribed and interpreted repetitively through narrative analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and it was specified through series of methodology such as (1) listening to the talking data, (2) communicating the talking data with an interpretative meaning, and (3) (re)constructing the talking data.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The richness of the narrative data allows an obvious thoughtful of language learning strategies that might have an impact on EFL students and teachers. Then, a number of key areas appear, including (1) students' attitudes towards LLSs, the recommended and non-recommended strategies in language learning, and the other contributing factor that affect the students' development on English learning.

3.1 Students' attitudes toward LLSs

The students were in unanimous acknowledgment with regard to their attitudes towards the LLSs in the EFL learning process. Their voices were documented as follows:

I think learning strategies is very important because in learning a subject in English, I found difficulty. So, I need learning strategies to solve it. (Participant 1)

Having strategies in English learning is the best way to have good skill. I cannot learn English properly if I don't have any strategy. As an impact, I will be easily give up and don't have struggle building up my spirit. So, I need strategies in English learning. (Participant 2)

For me, learning strategies are very crucial before I start to learn English and the implementation is not as easy as I imagine. (Participant 3)

In line with the positive replies related to LLSs, the students also revealed that the learning strategy played a vital role to pursue the success of English learning. Likewise, this relates to the quality of learning so that they can practice the English classroom well. It is depicted by these following remarks:

I am typically a student who is lazy to bring book everywhere. So I try to be initiative by looking for other learning sources to study. For example, I like studying by using phone to read some English texts and listen to video or podcast to train my listening skill. Those are the strategies to keep me learning whenever and wherever. (Participant 1)

Actually, having fun in English learning is my truly strategy. (Participant 2)

In my opinion, learning strategies become an important factor in the success of English learning. In my case, I always start with an intension or willingness; because it is first thing that I have to build up in myself. The next one is effort; an effort brings a big impact to my improvement. The last one is an evaluation; it is also very important how good my improvement in language learning. (Participant 3)

3.2 Recommended and Non-recommended Strategies

Both recommended and non-recommended strategies were also revealed by the students during the interview process. They were keen to uncover some kind of successful and unsuccessful learning strategies that contributed to the English learning process. It was portrayed through the following responses:

Effective strategies: *For me, the hardest English skill is listening. Now, I can be better listener since I am fond of listening to English music and I get used to open YouTube everyday. Those strategies are helpful because the more I listen to the English video, the more familiar I am with English language and the more easily in understanding the meaning and conversation. Beside that, I can imitate the way native speakers saying, including the pronunciation, tone, and styles. I just love to see them speaking English. Then, I practice wherever I walk, I always speak with myself and it helps me to improve my speaking skill as well.*

Ineffective strategies: *Besides those effective strategies, I perceive ineffective strategy in English learning, for instance is memorizing vocabulary. I thought that through memorizing vocabulary was a helpful strategy, and I practiced it for quite long time. In fact, my English skill didn't improve well. So I stopped implementing it the strategy. (Participant 1)*

Effective strategies: *The most successful strategy in my English learning is imitating the how the native speakers speak. I like singing, listening to music, watching movie, and reading books; and all the activities are done from English source. So when I learn English, the best strategy to learn is learning from native speaker of English.*

Ineffective strategy: *I ever implemented one strategy that didn't work well and it was thinking in two languages. So it will be much better to directly think and speak in English, because it will aid me to speak faster.*

Effective strategies: *I think the most beneficial strategy is having a high confidence. As long as I feel positive, I can focus and do the English learning activities well. In addition, a confidence will have positive impact as well, especially in my mind. I can feel more relax, no burden, and enjoy the English learning. For example, I like to talk to myself and believe that I am not a less creative than my other students in writing class as well as in the speaking classroom. I am not the best among my friends, yet as long as I can maintain my confidence so I can be better learner gradually.*

Ineffective strategies: *In the first semester, I used to memorize English vocabulary to improve my English skill, especially in speaking skill. This strategy was indeed good for my performance at that time, yet it made me worse and left behind my other friends. I still remember in my mind when my lecturer said that it could be much better if students can speak naturally without memorizing words or texts, because that strategy would not give good impact to the improvement of English. Finally I realized that memorization gave no any significant impact for my ability, and then I tried to leave using it in my English learning.*

3.3 Other Contributing Factors Affecting the EFL Learning

In the last session of interview, the students added several other aspects contributing their achievement in English learning. They put in plain words that learning strategies are not the only aspect affecting their success in English learning, and it was narrated as follows:

Actually, my classmates are another factor for my English improvement. We support each other in the process of English learning. Moreover, study club becomes our routine weekly meeting that has function to help all friends who have difficulties in English learning. (Participant 1)

No one supports me in English learning actually. My one and only factor is my own desire that I already mentioned before. (Participant 2)

Beside passion, support is a meaningful factor for me. Because the more support I get, the more I will help as well. Not only friends and family become my other factors in English learning, the society becomes the biggest factor. I just feel so thankful that I am surrounded by many great people such as my friends and my lecturers. They speak English very well, and this situation really higher my enthusiasm to learn better. (Participant 3)

Those were motivating finding because the positive attitudes towards LLSs became a prominent promotion through the use of LLSs in the process of language learning and teaching. Jiang & Smith (2009) postulated the similar result as regards the students' belief on the benefit of LLSs to the practice of English learning. Students perceived that implementing the LLSs is more effective and efficient for language learning because they knew how to solve the problem through language strategies than those who did not implement strategies. As an impact, they were able to explore themselves with regard to escalate the skill and performance. Hereupon, according to Hakan (2015), LLSs facilitated students to obtain more opportunity to be responsible for their own development.

The next discussion is related to the objective of the use of certain strategies. Students were aware of the strategies that were recommended and non-recommended. Without an objective, learning cannot be strategic (Gu, 2005). Gu's finding clearly implied that having such a purpose is automatically integrated through the practice of LLSs. Having some appropriate strategies also ensured the students' confidence in performing the target language, so the students could achieve better learning outcome. However, the non-recommended strategy employed by the students is obviously contrast with LoCastro (1994), he studied 28 EFL students in Japan as regard to the strategies used in English learning, and he then found that memorization was a successful strategy for the progress of English learning where the current finding found that memorization was an ineffective strategy particularly in speaking skill.

In fact, LLSs are not the only one factor affecting the students' success in mastering English. Other factors influencing the students' achievement in English learning were technology, learning environment, society, and personal condition. In line with the finding, a classroom environment could both courage and discourages the students' desire in English learning (Kausar, Kiyani, & Suleman, 2017). It can be inferred that classroom environment can be a determiner whether or not student can achieve the good learning outcome. In addition, the students' views on the importance of positive environment were supported by Hughes & Qi (2011), Rumfola (2017), McDonald & Hershman (2010). They agreed that students will be comfortable in the learning process with no threatening atmosphere. It means that environment influences the students learning outcome as well as gained a better achievement easier. All in all, the relationship between student and student and teacher and student were highly crucial in improving the students' skill in English learning.

4. CONCLUSION

Language learning strategies implemented in non-English speaking country is an extraordinary learning. It needs long process that considers some effective strategies so the process can be useful in achieving a more efficient learning outcome. This study emphasizes that the students in Indonesia, in particular at Universitas Islam Malang, have the same voices to the positive perception on language learning strategies. The more findings postulates that students must understand the objective of their learning so they will know what kind of strategies must be used and stopped in English learning. Then, technology, learning environment, society, and personal condition are other influencing factors in English language learning. Those also stimulate the students' learning interest, determination, and encouragement in English learning.

This current study can benefit to low language learning by imitating the recommended strategies and being aware of some other factors that cause the development of English achievement.

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