

EFL Learners' Language Learning Strategies: Field Specialization and Gender

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Abstract

Learning strategies are considered capable of greatly helping learners improve their proficiency in English and assist them to be more independent. The purpose of the study is to investigate language learning strategies used by secondary school students in Indonesia related to their field of specialization and gender. One hundred and eighty-six eleventh grade students from one of senior high schools in Pekanbaru, Indonesia participated in the survey. This was conducted using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) adopted from (Oxford, 1990) and the Strategy Questionnaire (SQ) adopted from Embi (2000). The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and an independent sample *t*-test. The findings show that the most frequently used strategy is metacognitive and affective, followed by cognitive and compensation strategies. The least frequently used strategies are social and memory strategies. Besides, it was also found that there were significant differences in the use of strategies between natural and social science students, and there were no significant differences between the two groups of students based on their gender. The study implies that students are aware of language learning strategies, however students still need to be trained to be a successful language learner.

Keywords: EFL; field of specialization; gender; independent learner; language learning strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Learning strategies are steps taken by learners to accelerate the attainment of knowledge, the storage of that data, and retrieval of information when they are needed. Those steps would help the learners comprehend what they have learned easily, faster, and in an enjoyable environment (Oxford, 1990). Besides, it would also enable the students to be self-reliant, competent, and allow them to use what they have learned in other situations. Uhl Chamot & El-Dinary (1999) pointed out that learning strategies are ways or techniques used by learners to help them in the learning process. Language learning strategies provide learners to improve their learning by increasing language skills, arising confidence, and increasing learners' motivation in the process of learning. Besides, learning strategies can support students to learn independently inside and outside the classroom. In other words, these strategies enhance learners to be independent, autonomous, and responsible for their learning progress and

achievement (Shi, 2017). Furthermore, it also can help learners to improve their ability or proficiency in using the language correctly and appropriately both oral and written. As a result, their communicative competence will develop (Oxford, 1990).

The teaching of the English language is aimed to set up the students to be skillful English communicators. Students who learn English are expected to master four basic skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. In short, teaching and learning English emphasizes the student's ability in mastering four language skills and become communicatively competent. Communicatively competent is the ability to communicate; it concerns both spoken and written language and all language skills (Savignon, 2018). To have the ability to communicate, language learning strategies are appropriate techniques to be applied in learning either inside or outside the classroom. Language learning strategies encourage students to

develop their communicative competence so that they become successful language learners.

Since English is not the first language among Indonesians, students who learn English face many difficulties in mastering the language. In this present time, especially, where the students are facing the globalization and its technology. They are asked to prepare themselves to participate in globalization. In this era, English is functioning as the main medium for international communication. Indonesian students are hoped to have good proficiency in English in order to make them be more competitive in the global word.

In fact, the English language proficiency of Indonesian students is still unsatisfactory. Based on EF EPI (EF English Proficiency Index) Report 2019, Indonesia is in the low proficiency category (<https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/>). Many students are unsuccessful in learning English, even though they have studied English for more than ten years. It can be said that they do not know how to learn English effectively. Furthermore, when learning English at school, the materials were focused on grammar and reading, then the chance to speak and practice English also limited (Nguyen, 2011). On the contrary, the teacher generally does not teach them how to learn it. Low proficiency has been an important issue in the Indonesian education system, and of course, needs to take more attention and resolve. To advance their English, it is essential to understand language learning strategies.

Language learning strategies can be taught and learnt by students. Language learning strategies have important role in the process of acquiring information, increasing autonomy, and self-confidence development which assist learners in achieving greater control over their own learning (Nosratinia, Saveiy, & Zaker, 2014). By teaching students how to use learning strategies, it is believed that the students will have better learning outcomes in which develop them to be autonomous learners (Lengkanawati, 2014a). Language learning strategies are the most vital factor in the language process, success or failure will, in the end, be determined by the learner themselves (Rubin, Thompson, & Sun, 1982). Good language learners usually use a variety of learning strategies. They can use different kinds of learning strategies appropriately, and using these strategies can better improve their language skills (Fedderholdt, 1997). To be able to use the appropriate learning strategies learners need teachers' assistances.

Learning strategies are strategies and tools that can be applied by students to enhance their own learning, and to encourage students to be active and self-directed which is very important for developing communication competencies (Oxford, 1990). She further explains three types of direct LLS. The first is a memory strategy that helps store information in long-term memory and retrieve information when it is needed for communication. The second is a cognitive strategy, which is used to construct and revise internal mental models and receive and generate messages in the

target language. Lastly, it is a compensation strategy that is needed to address the gaps in language knowledge.

Besides, Oxford (1990) has identified three types of indirect LLS. The first is a meta-cognitive strategy that helps students exercise 'executive control' through planning, organizing, focusing, and evaluating their own learning. The second is affective strategy will enable learners to control feelings, motivation, and attitudes related to language learning. Finally, social strategies will facilitate interactions with other people, often in discourse situations.

In Indonesia, there have been many studies on language learning strategies. Especially those related to the four language skills (e.g Amir, 2018; Gunastri, Vianty, & Fiftinova, 2020; Kurniawati & Ramadhiyanti, 2013; Lengkanawati, 1997; Lestari & Fatimah, 2020; Meliasari, 2019; Mistar & Umamah, 2014; Setiyadi, Sukirlan, & Mahpul, 2016). However, there has been insufficient research that investigates learners' language learning strategies regarding their field of specialization and gender. Therefore, there is still room for us to conduct research related to the field of specialization and gender.

This research was conducted in one of the senior high schools in Indonesia. This research focused on the variation of language learning strategies used by eleventh-grade students according to their field of specialization and gender. So, the present study aims to scrutinize the language learning strategies they employed most frequently. Besides, the differences in learning strategies between students' major and gender were also compared.

METHOD

This study employed quantitative research, specifically using a survey research design to answer the research questions mentioned above.

The participants of the study were 186 eleventh grade students in one of the senior high schools in Indonesia. There were eighty-six natural science students and a hundred social science students. The participants were also divided into two large groups (74 male students and 112 female students).

This study used the questionnaires Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) adopted from Oxford (1990) and Strategy Questionnaire (SQ) adopted from (Embi, 2000) to collect the data. The questionnaire consisted of fifty-eight statements about strategies used by language learners. The participants responded to the statements in five scales, ranging from "never or almost never true of me" to "always" or "almost always true of me". The questionnaire contained two parts. Part A consisted of the background information and Part B was the Strategy Inventory for language learning (SILL). The questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Indonesia.

To collect the data, the researchers had asked permission from the headmaster of the school to distribute the questionnaire. Then, the researchers collected the data directly. The questionnaire was

distributed to the 186 respondents. The time needed to respond to the instruments ranged from 25 to 30 minutes. The instruments were collected after respondents had answered to all the items on the questionnaire.

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics and an independent sample *t-test* were used. Descriptive statistics was run to compute the data for the subjects' demographic profiles such as the field of specialization and gender. Statistical analysis was operated to find out the learning strategies that students use based on frequencies, means, and standard deviations. The frequency ratings were adopted from Oxford (1990). To see the differences of language learning strategies between field of specialization gender, the researchers used the independent sample *t-test* using SPSS 12 for Window with the significance level set at $p < .05$.

Table 1
Scale rating

| Frequency Use | Responses | Mean Score |
|---------------|--|------------------------|
| High use | Always or almost used Usually used | 4.5 - 5.0 3.5 - 4.4 |
| Medium use | Sometimes use | 2.5 - 3.4 |
| Low use | Generally not used Never or almost never used | 1.5 - 2.4 1.0 - 1.4 |

RESULTS

The results from the questionnaires show that all language learning strategies mentioned in the questionnaire were employed by the learners.

Table 2
Mean scores and frequency of strategy use

| Rank | Strategy Category | Mean Score | Frequency of Use |
|------|-------------------|------------|------------------|
| 1 | Metacognitive | 3.16 | Medium |
| 2 | Affective | 3.07 | Medium |
| 3 | Cognitive | 2.95 | Medium |
| 4 | Compensation | 2.80 | Medium |
| 5 | Social | 2.74 | Medium |
| 6 | Memory | 2.70 | Medium |

Table 2 shows that students used all strategy categories at a medium frequency. Metacognitive strategies were used most frequently and have the highest mean score ($M=3.16$), followed by affective ($M=3.07$), cognitive ($M=2.95$), compensation ($M=2.80$), social strategies ($M=2.74$), and finally the memory strategy ($M=2.70$).

Table 3
Mean scores of strategy category used by natural science and social science students

| Natural Science | | | Social Science | | |
|-----------------|-----------|------|----------------|-----------|------|
| Rank | Strategy | M | Rank | Strategy | M |
| 1 | Metacog | 3.46 | 1 | Affective | 2.94 |
| 2 | Affective | 3.21 | 2 | Metacog | 2.90 |
| 3 | Cognitive | 3.18 | 3 | Cognitive | 2.75 |
| 4 | Social | 3.06 | 4 | Social | 2.74 |
| 5 | Compen | 3.01 | 5 | Compen | 2.61 |
| 6 | Memory | 2.92 | 6 | Memory | 2.51 |

As can be seen from Table 3, metacognitive strategies were used most frequently by natural science students with the mean score 3.46, then followed by affective, cognitive, social, compensation, and memory strategy. Meanwhile, Social science students used affective strategy most frequently at a medium level of frequency ($M=2.94$). All the other strategy groups were also at the medium frequency level.

Table 4
Mean scores of strategy category used by male and female students

| Male | | | Female | | |
|------|-----------|------|--------|-----------|------|
| Rank | Strategy | M | Rank | Strategy | M |
| 1 | Metacog | 3.00 | 1 | Metacog | 3.27 |
| 2 | Cognitive | 2.90 | 2 | Affective | 3.20 |
| 3 | Affective | 2.86 | 3 | Cognitive | 2.98 |
| 4 | Compen | 2.70 | 4 | Compen | 2.86 |
| 5 | Memory | 2.66 | 5 | Social | 2.80 |
| 6 | Social | 2.65 | 6 | Memory | 2.72 |

Based on the data shown in Table 4, the two strategy categories used at a high level of frequency for the male students were metacognitive ($M = 3.00$) and cognitive ($M = 2.90$). They were followed by affective, compensation, memory, and social respectively at a medium level of frequency. Female students also used the metacognitive strategy most frequently at a medium level of frequency. All the other strategy groups were also at the medium frequency level.

Table 5
Most frequently used learning strategies for the various groups

| <i>Learning Strategies</i> | <i>Category</i> | <i>Rank</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>Std</i> |
|---|-----------------|-------------|----------|------------|
| Natural Science | | | | |
| 27. I look up words I don't understand in an English-Indonesia dictionary | Cognitive | 1 | 4.52 | .747 |
| 53. If I don't understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again | Social | 2 | 4.02 | .811 |
| Social Science | | | | |
| 27. I look up words I don't understand in an English-Indonesia dictionary | Cognitive | 1 | 4.18 | 1.067 |
| 26. I look up words I don't understand in an English- English dictionary | Cognitive | 2 | 3.67 | 1.429 |
| Male | | | | |
| 27. I look up words I don't understand in an English-Indonesia dictionary | Cognitive | 1 | 4.15 | 1.094 |
| 40. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English | Metacognitive | 2 | 3.57 | 1.228 |
| Female | | | | |
| 27. I look up words I don't understand in an English-Indonesia dictionary | Cognitive | 1 | 4.46 | .816 |
| 40. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English | Metacognitive | 2 | 4.12 | .888 |

Table 5 displays the two most used strategies employed by various groups. An interesting finding is that natural science students reported using the metacognitive category most frequently, but of the 58 itemized strategies, the two most frequently used strategies belonged to the cognitive and social category. Social science students reported using the

cognitive strategy frequently. While male students reported to use the cognitive and metacognitive most frequently and followed by female students also used the cognitive and metacognitive category most frequently.

Table 6
The least used learning strategies for various groups

| <i>Learning Strategies</i> | <i>Category</i> | <i>Rank</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Standard Deviation</i> |
|--|-----------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Natural Science | | | | |
| 51. I write down my feelings in a Language diary. | Affective | 1 | 1.97 | 1.163 |
| 6. I use flashcards to remember new English words | Memory | 2 | 2.01 | .988 |
| Social Science | | | | |
| 19. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English. | Cognitive | 1 | 1.65 | .958 |
| 6. I use flashcards to remember new English words | Memory | 2 | 1.69 | 1.089 |
| Male | | | | |
| 51. I write down my feelings in Language diary. | Affective | 1 | 1.88 | 1.146 |
| 19. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English. | Cognitive | 2 | 1.89 | 1.105 |
| Female | | | | |
| 19. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English. | Cognitive | 1 | 1.77 | 0.977 |
| 6. I use flashcards to remember new English words | Memory | 2 | 1.82 | .968 |

Table 6 displays the two least used learning strategies for the various groups. The two least frequently learning strategies used by natural science students belonged to the affective and memory category. Social science students reported using cognitive and memory strategies the least frequently. Male students reported to use affective and cognitive strategy the least frequency and followed by female students reported to use cognitive and memory strategy the least frequency.

A *t-test* analysis was performed to examine the differences of learning strategies used by students based on field of specialization and gender.

Table 7
Analysis of *t-test* result based on field of specialization

| Major | M | SD | T | Df | Sig. |
|-----------------|--------|--------|-------|-----|------|
| Natural Science | 183.13 | 27.214 | 5.719 | 184 | .042 |
| Social Science | 157.19 | 33.63 | 5.810 | | |

Table 7 shows a significant difference in learning strategies used between natural science (M= 183.13) and social science students (M=157.19). The significance level is smaller than the significant level of 0.05 ($p=0.042<0.05$). It means that natural science students used a lot of learning strategies than social science students.

Table 8
Analysis for *t-test* result based on gender

| Gender | M | SD | T | Df | Sig. |
|--------|--------|--------|-------|-----|------|
| Male | 163.82 | 32.599 | 1.790 | 184 | .588 |
| Female | 172.72 | 34.042 | 1.775 | | |

Based on the result shown in Table the mean score for female students was higher than male students (significant level 0.588 with means of 172.72 and 163.82 respectively). It means that there is no significant difference between male and female students in learning strategies used.

DISCUSSION

The students' Language Learning Strategies

Based on the findings above, Indonesian students reported that metacognitive strategies as the most frequently used, and memory strategies as the least used. This finding was consistent with the findings of Gunastri et al. (2020), Meliasari (2019), and (Tanjung, 2018) who studied language learning strategies use by EFL University students in Indonesia. They revealed that metacognitive strategy falls into the highest frequency used by the students. While memory strategy falls into the lowest frequency used by the students. Also, Alfian & Rossetto (2016) and Rianto (2020) found that the most frequently used is metacognitive. However, the least frequently used is compensation strategy. The result, however, was in contradiction with the findings of Lengkanawati (2004), who revealed in her studies that memory strategies were more frequently used by Indonesia Students.

From the results, it concluded that students use indirect language learning strategies consisting of metacognitive and effective strategies. It indicated that students have self-learning management. Both

strategies help students to control their learning through planning, organizing, focusing, and evaluating (Oxford, 1990).

The differences of learning strategies used by natural science and social science students.

The *t-test* results showed a significant difference between natural science and social science students. The natural science students used greater strategies compared to social science students. The finding of this study is different from some of the study that has been conducted by some researcher (Gu, 2002; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Rianto, 2020). They found that the social science students used overall language learning strategies more frequently in their EFL learning.

In addition, the present study's finding is similar to El-Omari's (2002). His study revealed that scientific stream learner's overall strategy use is greater than that of the literary and vocational stream students. Moreover, Osanai (2000) in his study, found statistically significant differences in school majors with regard to language learning strategies use. Students who major in science/ computer/health science use significantly more strategies than business/law students do. This finding indicates that educational specialization can greatly affect learners' language learning strategy choices.

The differences of learning strategies used by male and female students.

Based on the finding, there were no significant differences between male and female students in using learning strategies. Female students, however, preferred to use language-learning strategies more often than males. This finding is consistent with the findings of research conducted by Afrizal (2005) and Osanai (2000), in which they found that there was no significant difference between gender and overall strategy use. This finding is also in line with Ajeng's study (2017) that the language learning strategies used by the students were not too different between male and female learners. Even though they have the same strategies, they have different activities that they choose in the learning process. She also found that male students used more metacognitive and social strategies than female learners, but female learners used more cognitive strategies than male learners. This suggests that strategy use does not depend on students' gender. Both male and female students were interested enough in English to take English as an optimal subject. Therefore, learning strategies were used frequently regardless of gender. This strong interest might diminish sex differences in the use of learning strategies.

However, the findings of this study are contradicted by the findings of Alfian & Rossetto (2016) and Rianto (2020) who revealed in their studies that there was a significant difference in the overall use of LLS between male and female participants. Embi's (2000) study also showed a greater reported strategy use for female than male students. A similar result in his

dissertation, Embi (1996) reports that gender differences in learner's reported strategy use are found mainly in strategies which relate to social learning in the classroom and examination preparation. Then he concluded that teachers should realize that there are gender differences in learner's strategies use with females generally reporting greater strategy use than males.

A difference in the findings of this study compared to the studies above is that the SILL test given to the students in those studies was in the native language of students or English is learned as a second language. They already knew a great deal about how to learn. However, this study was conducted in an Indonesian context, where English is learned as a foreign language and is only learned or practiced in the classroom. As Green & Oxford (1995) noted, students in an ESL context have a better chance of practicing the language out of the class. As compared to an EFL context, students only have the chance to practice the language inside the classroom.

The findings of the present study explain the importance of language learning strategies instruction to senior high school students explicitly because most of them are motivated to learn English. In the context of a second and foreign language, learner training is highly needed (Oxford, 1990). Language learning in these two areas needs active self-direction. Therefore, the teachers should play their role to teach students how to use learning strategies. It is supported by Embi (2000) and Lengkanawati (2014) who argue that teachers play important roles in learner training. Cohen (2014) further mentions that teachers must reconsider their roles and alter their belief-system from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness in the 21st-century. In line with 2013 curriculum regulations, teachers are asked to shift their approach from teacher-centered to learner-centered. The teacher should give students opportunities to find information or knowledge by themselves. In addition, related to 21st-century learning, students are demanded to be technology literate, active, and independent in learning English. They should learn how to find information, identify the problems, and solve them by themselves. Utilizing language learning strategies could help the students to learn English effectively.

Another important point is offering a strategy-based instruction to students. Strategy-based instruction accommodates individual learners and meets students' learning needs in the classroom. As a result, learners are more responsible for learning English, more independent in learning both in the classroom and out of the classroom, and the most important thing is learner autonomy can be developed and learning goals eventually can be achieved (Lengkanawati, 2017).

Teacher training is also important for a teacher before strategy instruction is given to students. So teachers are strongly suggested to attend technical training for learning strategies before training their students (Nyikos, 1996). Thus, with the efforts of

teachers and students, effective language learning can be achieved. As already mentioned, the purpose of language learning strategies is to make learning easier, faster, more efficient, effective, and independent (Oxford, 1990).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that in general second-year students of senior high schools in Indonesia are medium strategy users. The most frequently used strategy is a metacognitive strategy and then affective, followed by cognitive and compensation strategies. The least frequently used strategies are social and memory strategies. It indicated that senior high school students have self-learning management. Besides, the findings show that there is a significant difference in the use of language learning strategies between natural and social science students, and there is no significant difference in the use of language learning strategies between male and female students. From the findings, it is suggested that teachers and students should be aware of the importance of language learning strategies in learning English to enhance students' English proficiency. Teacher and students' training are also suggested to be conducted to achieve the effectiveness of language learning.

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