

Research Paper

Exploring ESL Students' Language Learning Strategies at an Independent Chinese Secondary School in Malaysia

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Abstract: LLSs (language learning strategies) are the strategies selected by learners to comprehend, retain, retrieve, and use information in language learning deliberately and consciously. It has been established that LLSs have significant effects on second language learning. The purpose of this study is to explore the LLSs employed by the ESL students in learning English language at one of the Independent Chinese Secondary Schools in Malaysia. By adopting a case study approach, nine students of three proficiency levels (high, average, and low achievers) in the school were selected as participants. The investigation was framed through Oxford's (1990) classification of LLS to contextualise the students' LLS for thematic analysis. The findings reveal that high achievers often use metacognitive and cognitive strategies. The average achievers and low achievers often use a wide range of strategies. In addition, the students are able to self-direct their English language learning with the LLS they employed outside the formal classroom autonomously. Recommendations for further/future research related to LLS are provided.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, self-directed learning, ESL students/learners, high achievers, average achievers, and low achievers

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Introduction

LLSs (language learning strategies) have been defined as mental processes/actions that learners consciously select to regulate/facilitate their learning or to perform learning tasks (Griffiths, 2008; Ortega, 2009; Oxford, 2017; Sukying, 2021). Research has shown that LLSs have an important role in second language learning (Cohen, 2000; Holec, 1981; Nunan, 1999; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2017; Suwanarak, 2019; Wenden, 1998). The deployment of LLSs could assist ESL learners in mastering the forms and functions required for reception and production skills in the second language (Bialystok, 1979; Oxford, 1990). Additionally, LLSs help learners to cope with various issues/problems in a language learning process. An active use of these strategies helps to develop language skills, increase self-confidence and motivation in the learning process (Su & Duo, 2010).

As one of the prominent leaders in the field of LLS, Oxford (1990, 2011, 2017) recognises that LLSs are particularly essential for second language learning as they are tools for active and self-directed involvement, which are critically important for developing language proficiency. LLSs are purposefully used to understand, practice, memorize, compensate for missing knowledge, recall information, and thus make learning easier, faster and more enjoyable (Oxford, 1990, 2017). Thus, it is reasonably believed that how a strategy is used might have great significance in contributing to successful language learning.

Learners may adopt a wide repertoire of LLSs that they use across different learning contexts or across different language levels for their ESL learning. What differentiates between the high achievers and low achievers are the range, frequency rates, and the appropriateness of applying the strategies as well as different processes used (Ardasheva et al., 2017; Hashim et al., 2018; Griffiths, 2013; Oxford, 2011; Samperio, 2017; Sanchez, 2019).

According to Khosravi (2012), proficiency is regarded as one of the most prominent variables that influences strategy use. Most of the literature focused on “high achievers or successful language learners” to determine what makes them successful with the use of their LLS (Chamot et al., 1999; Griffiths, 2018; Naiman et al., 1978; Rubin, 1975). What has been overlooked is that learners of different proficiency levels might be using similar or different types of strategies, varying frequency of certain strategies, different processes or they might not be using the strategies adequately and efficiently.

The Context

Learners from different groups may adopt different strategies and the use of strategies is significantly influenced by the motivation of the learners, context/language learning environment, culture, learning style, gender, and age (Oxford, 2001). Lee and Heinz

(2016) and Takeuchi (2003) pointed out that the strategy preferences of learners are profoundly influenced by their EFL or ESL context. As the effects of context and culture have been two of the main issues that influence the strategy use (Chamot, 2004), one of the Independent Chinese Secondary School (ICSS) in Malaysia was selected as the context setting for this research.

ICSS, which is also known as CIHS (Chinese Independent High School), are self-funding Chinese private high schools in Malaysia (UCSCAM/Dong Zong, 2018). As the name suggests, ICSSs are independent in their own curriculum (Ong et al., 2020). The curriculum and textbooks used in ICSSs are designed and developed by Dong Zong and it also conducts the UEC (Unified Examination Certificate). Students are required to sit for the UEC at the end of their Junior Three and Senior Three which is similar to Form Three and Form Six in Malaysian national schools. There are also some ICSSs that offer SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, a national examination offered by Malaysian national curriculum) to their students, though it is not compulsory for all ICSSs.

This study was conducted at one of the ICSSs that offers both UEC and SPM programs. Generally, students in this ICSS are prepared for the two important leaving examinations: UEC and SPM. Students sit for SPM in the fifth year and they sit for UEC in the sixth year upon completion of their six years secondary education. Despite language differences in the two curricula (Chinese language is used for UEC and Malay language is used for SPM), Chinese is the medium/language of instruction for all subjects. English and Malay languages are taught as separate subjects. The Science subject and Mathematics subject in UEC are available in the Chinese language and English language. However, due to the Chinese native background of the students and teachers, all the lessons in this ICSS are mostly instructed in Chinese. Only non-Chinese English teachers would use English fully as the medium of instruction for the English subject.

In the official curriculum of UEC and SPM, English is a compulsory subject. English is taught 6 lessons (40 minutes per lesson) a week. The number of hours available for learning English will influence the level of achievement (Getie, 2020). Further, socialisation at schools with peers and teachers in Chinese is also one of the factors that influence English acquisition (Yahaya et al., 2011). Most of the students are Chinese whose native language is the Chinese language, and they come from Chinese primary schools and a Chinese cultural background. Apart from the "Chinese-educated" background, educational contexts such as fewer opportunities for interactions in English among students and teachers, having Chinese as the medium of instruction for most of the subjects except English and Malay languages, literally minimise the opportunities for exposure to English and for students to practise English.

Nonetheless, instrumental reasons such as having English as a compulsory subject, English being a requirement for entry to pre-university and higher

institutions, English being regarded as a lingua franca of the world, and English being an important instrument for national development (Talukder et al., 2022), serve as the motivational factors for students to learn the language. Additionally, accessing more reading materials for interest/pleasure, watching English movies, listening to English songs or internet browsing/surfing are also the impetus to learn the language. With the awareness that mastering the English language is fundamentally important to academic success and their future, many of the students attend English tuition classes during weekends.

Considering the complexity and diversity in bilingual education, other factors that contribute to the challenges in learning English as a second language include students' Chinese native language background, individual differences such as motivation, social and affective factors, values, attitudes, and students' expectations. To put things into context, learning English as a second language (ESL) is more like learning English as a foreign language (EFL) where the majority of learning only happens in a classroom with limited exposures and opportunities to use the language.

In light of this, this study aims to explore the LLSs adopted by the ESL students of three proficiency levels who undertake their English language learning including reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation within its complex learning contexts. Additionally, this research also explores how the ESL students self-direct their English language learning outside the school with the use of LLSs. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the language learning strategies (LLSs) employed by the ESL students in learning the English language at an Independent Chinese Secondary School in Malaysia?
- 2) How do the ESL students self-direct their English language learning outside the school with the use of language learning strategies (LLSs)?

Literature Review

Over the decades, researchers have been studying cognitive psychology concerning processing information in learning methods and learning strategies linked to learners' mental processes that could contribute to their language learning achievement (Oxford, 1990; Suwanarak, 2019; Uztosun, 2014; Wenden, 1987). Numerous researches conducted in the area of LLS have shown a positive correlation between the use of strategies and success (Ghafournia, 2014; Griffiths, 2003; Lee & Heinz, 2016; Oxford, 2017; Sanchez, 2019; Sukying, 2021).

According to Samperio (2019), for a learner to attain success in language learning, he/she must be motivated to learn, adopt adequate behaviours in learning, and have a repertoire of strategies to choose from to solve language tasks. Zewdie (2015) discovered that high achievers and low achievers use certain similar strategies but the high achievers are more active in producing language and they monitor

their performance from time to time. Meanwhile, Tang (2015) contended that high achievers and low achievers vary considerably in the adoption of metacognitive strategies. The high achievers are proactive in their learning (Macaro, 2001) and they adopt a wide range of strategies which they learn over time and experience (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015).

Furthermore, high achievers are capable of finding solutions to assist them in dealing with learning in any learning contexts (Sanchez, 2019). Oxford (2017) pointed out that learners adopt “metacognitive approaches to process information and apply their knowledge” (Young, 2018, p.18). Hong-Nam and Page (2014), Nhan and Lai (2012) and Young (2018) also found that learners who use metacognitive strategies and problem-solving have better English proficiency than those who do not use these strategies. O'Malley et al. (1985), Lee and Heinz, (2016), and Nhan and Lai (2012) concluded that three groups of language learning categories, namely metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies are used frequently by ESL high achievers in their research.

Low achievers have been defined as unsuccessful learners who progress relatively slower and they might be spending more time on learning, yet having lower scores. The low score factor is seen as the most common measure of low achievement. Rajak (2004) found that low achievers display an interest in learning English and they use LLS without much achievement in their learning. Their poor performance comes from a lack of motivation, effort, and effective LLS (Alderman, 2004; Normazidah et al., 2012; Samperio, 2017; Sanchez, 2019). Studies have shown that low achievers use compensation and memory strategies more frequently than metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2014; Oxford, 2011; Samperio, 2019; Sanchez, 2019; Sukying, 2021; Tang, 2015). They explained that these two strategies are used to substitute their limited knowledge by guessing or inferring intelligently from the context clues, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing, or using memorisation skills.

Numerous studies have tried to define which characteristics of the learners would contribute to successful ESL learning, and the consensus of opinion/attributes in successful language learning are able to work independently (self-directed), be self-reliant, take charge of developing aspects of their own learning, be motivated, and have a positive view of the target language and its culture (Fenner, 2011; Oxford, 2017; Samperio, 2019). A learner's ability to monitor his or her own learning is considered as the ultimate goal in language learning as he or she learns how to learn, how to develop or adopt the skills, and to solve problems in learning as well as real-world situations (Holec, 1981). On the whole, not only do LLSs enable ESL learners to learn a second language effectively and efficiently, but they also help to develop their abilities of self-directed and autonomous learning (Hawkins, 2018; Holec, 1981; Oxford, 2017; Thu, 2009; Wenden 1998). This is very much in line

with the ethos of Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0), where learners are developed to become “versatile and inventive thinkers who are capable of choosing and using the right skills and knowledge” (Ramasamy & Lee, 2022, p. 9).

Oxford’s framework of LLS (1990) which is one of the most comprehensive classifications among other scholars (Adom & Hussein, 2018; Ellis, 1994; Lee & Heinz, 2016; Shi, 2017; Tam, 2013) underpins the background of this study. Oxford’s (1990, 2017) classification system of strategies is divided into two main categories: direct and indirect strategies, which are sub-divided into six various strategies:

- 1) Direct strategies directly influence the learning process and relate to the mental processing of the language (Sukyng, 2021). Direct strategies include:
 - a) Cognitive strategies for language production/processing and comprehension.
 - b) Memory strategies for storing, retrieving, reviewing, and creating information.
 - c) Compensation strategies for learners to overcome constraints in language learning such as making up for insufficient repertoire of grammar and vocabulary.
- 2) Indirect strategies support and manage language learning indirectly, but they are vital to the learning process (Shi, 2017). Indirect strategies include:
 - a) Metacognitive strategies for monitoring/manipulating learning, planning, and self- evaluating.
 - b) Affective strategies for monitoring emotions, motivation, and attitudes.
 - c) Social strategies for cooperating with peers in language learning, seeking help from others, and interactions.

Methodology

Grenfell and Macaro (2007) posited that LLSs adopted by learners can be studied and documented, though LLSs are not always observable as all LLSs begin as mental processes (i.e. metacognitive and cognitive strategies) which rarely ever become visible to the observer. In most learning contexts, the only way to accurately identify learners’ LLS for a language skill or task is to ask the learners to describe or self-report (Bessai, 2018; Chamot, 2004; Cohen, 1998; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Rubin, 1975; Wenden 1991). Given this phenomenon, semi-structured interview was selected as the method to gain insights into the unobservable aspects of mental learning strategies of the individual ESL students in this qualitative case study. This allowed for the exploration of the ESL students’ LLS and for various aspects of the LLS to be explored and understood within its context (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used in the selection of participants. The sample size of the participants is nine students (4 males and 5 females) from three groups:

high achievers, average achievers, and low achievers. All the students were Chinese native speakers and English is learned as a second language. All groups comprised three students each to provide a better understanding of LLS use of students from each group. The SPM and UEC examination results provided by the school were used as a proficiency measure to classify the students' English proficiency levels. Table 1 provides further details of the participants.

Table 1. Student participants' profiles

Pseudonym	Age (years old)	SPM / UEC Results	Proficiency level
Student A	19	B / B-	Average Achiever
Student B	19	B / B-	Average Achiever
Student C	19	B / B-	Average Achiever
Student D	19	A+ / A	High Achiever
Student E	19	A / A	High Achiever
Student F	19	A- / A	High Achiever
Student G	19	C / Failed	Low Achiever
Student H	19	C / B-	Low Achiever
Student I	19	B- / C	Low Achiever

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, data were collected using semi-structured interviews with nine participants. Prior to data collection, the interview protocol was piloted on two volunteer ESL students to make sure that the questions were understandable, explicit, and adequate to elicit rich responses. During the interviews, the participants were asked about their English learning experiences and strategies. Ten questions that focused on the seven aspects of the language skills were asked to answer RQ1 and RQ2. Some of the sample questions for RQ1 read as “What did you do to improve your speaking/reading/writing/listening skills? How did you learn your pronunciation?” Some of the sample questions in RQ2 read as “How did you improve your/advance your English proficiency outside the classroom? How did you plan your time/schedule to study English?” Where applicable, probing/prompt questions were asked to elicit more in-depth information and to clarify the responses given by the participants. Some of the sample probing/prompt questions were “How would you try to find opportunities to improve your speaking skills? If you were given a listening passage ‘War in Ukraine’, how would you listen to summarise the main points? What are the steps you would take? What are the tips or advice that you can give to someone who wants to improve his or her English?”

All the nine interviews took place remotely through Zoom and each of them lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview data were then coded and analysed deductively using Oxford's (1990) classification of LLS for RQ1. LLSs were predetermined from the six categories of LLS described by Oxford (1990) for coding to support/classify the strategies that learners used in their English language learning. As for RQ2, the data were analysed using thematic analysis to generate codes, sub-themes and themes found in the quotes/excerpts.

Prior to the interviews, consent forms were signed by all the participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the participants throughout the research process and interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. The researcher also sought voluntary participation from all the participants from the outset and explained to the participants their right to end their participation anytime.

Findings

RQ 1: What are the language learning strategies employed by the ESL students in learning the English language at an Independent Chinese Secondary School in Malaysia?

The findings show that among the six categories of strategies, the high achievers often used metacognitive and cognitive strategies. The least used is compensation strategies and they have never used memory, affective, and social strategies. As for the average achievers and low achievers, they adopted a wide range of strategies from the six categories. The most used strategies by average achievers and low achievers are cognitive and compensation strategies. The average achievers often used two to three strategies from compensation, cognitive, metacognitive, social, and memory strategies and the least used strategy is affective strategies. The low achievers also often used two to three strategies from compensation, cognitive, memory, social strategies and the least used are metacognitive strategies and affective strategies. One of the strategies that is not in Oxford's (1990) LLS classification is teacher's instruction which was used by the low achievers to improve their speaking skills, pronunciation, and grammar.

The strategies adopted by the participants were identified with reference to the following seven aspects of the language skills.

Strategies for Improving Speaking Skills in English

The high achievers reported using metacognitive strategies to improve their speaking skills. They shared that they always consciously sought opportunities to practise the language including speaking in English with their English teacher and friends, watching English videos and movies to learn their accent in speaking. As explained

by Student D: *"I try to talk more with my friends. I speak to English teachers. I watch a lot of English videos to keep my listening and speaking skills on track".*

The average achievers reported using metacognitive strategies to improve their speaking skills. Student A practised English naturalistically by singing, Student B watched movies or drama and Student C would try to look for opportunities to speak and use texting messages to learn more vocabulary for speaking. As mentioned by Student A: *"I would sing songs, songs can reflect the authentic feel of English, and it also helps to improve my speaking. I also took part in English poem competitions and English speech contests. I would try to improve my speaking skills from whatever opportunities".*

The low achievers reported using different strategies including social strategies, cognitive strategies, and teacher's instruction to improve their speaking skills. Student G used social and cognitive strategies to speak with friends and ask classmates who are better than him. Student I used cognitive strategy to remember the sounds by listening to YouTube. Student H pointed out that teacher's instruction such as how to improve speaking skills, take part in speech contests, and converse in English in the class has helped her to improve her speaking skills. As explained by Student H: *"We have communication class so we did role-play etc. to practice our speaking skills. Some of us sat for IELTS so teacher would teach us how to speak better. Teacher would request us to speak in English in class. And she also wanted us to take part in speech contest, I think all these helped to improve my speaking skills".*

Strategies for Improving Reading Skills in English

The high achievers reported using a wide range of cognitive strategies such as analysing, reasoning, creating structures for input and output, recognising the patterns in reading, and repeating the reading task to improve their reading skills and to complete reading tasks. One of them also used metacognitive strategies to seek out opportunities to practice their reading skills. As explained by Student D: *"Understand the synopsis, describe what you like about this story, try to share a few sides of the story, understand why the story is so special, understand the contents and background of the story, how this story can change others and this is my way of presenting it. I would go through the article, dig deeper, try to understand, start to write what do I think is important".*

The average achievers reported using cognitive strategies such as comprehending, getting ideas, creating, recombining to improve their reading skills and complete a reading task. Student B mentioned that: *"First, I will try to understand and make a summary. Maybe I will try to find more information and make me more understand so I can summarise it".*

The low achievers reported using cognitive strategies such as taking notes, comprehending, and summarising to improve their reading skills and to complete a reading task. Student G read books to improve his reading, as explained by him: *"Get*

some interesting books to read like comics. I like to read comics. I will read the story first and write down the important points then make a summary”.

Strategies for Improving Writing Skills in English

The high achievers reported using metacognitive strategies including doing more reading, self- talk, planning, paying attention to improving their writing skills and cognitive strategies including analysing, and recognising the patterns in completing a writing task. As explained by Student F: *“Every language, it has its own structures, so read more can help me to write better. I have my own writing SOP. I would list down my points and I would see if the points are sufficient, if not I would emphasise more and put them in writing. A simple way is to memorise the words, phrases, read more and learn from others”.*

Both the groups of average achievers and low achievers reported using a variety of strategies including metacognitive, cognitive, social, and compensation strategies to improve their writing skills. Student I used cognitive strategies to identify ways to improve and to recognise her weaknesses, as she explained: *“I believe speaking requires courage to speak out, reading requires to listen more, and writing requires more reading. My weaknesses are grammar and vocab”.* Also, she used compensation strategies to get help from Google and asked for clarification and correction, saying that *“I used Google Translate to organise my ideas first. Usually, I would ask my father if he is next to me. He is good at English so he would correct me and we would communicate in English in messages”.*

Strategies for Improving Listening Skills in English

The high achievers reported using metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies to improve their listening skills. Students D and F used metacognitive strategies such as seeking listening practice exposures and practices through listening to native speakers in videos and the internet. As explained by Student D: *“I exposed a lot to English community through a lot of English-speaking videos, through internet, listening and watch a lot of videos. Through listening to authentic speakers”.* Student E used cognitive strategies such as taking notes and using resources for listening. As explained by Student E: *“I would write down the main points, when I come across the part/word that I don’t know. I tried to watch movies and not to see the subtitles”.*

Both the groups of average achievers and low achievers reported using a variety of strategies including metacognitive, cognitive, affective and compensation strategies to improve their listening skills. Among them, cognitive and compensation strategies are the most used by these two groups of participants. Student C used cognitive strategies to make notes, as explained by Student C: *“My memory is good, I can listen and write down at the same time and I can remember all the things and write all down”.*

Additionally, she also used compensation strategies such as listening to songs and watching news to improve her listening skills, as she explained: *"I would watch news from tv, just want to know the difference between Chinese and English. I listen to English songs. Yes, it helps sometimes"*.

Strategies for Improving Pronunciation in English

The high achievers reported using metacognitive strategies to improve their pronunciation and compensation strategies to get help from subtitles. They listened to native speakers' pronunciation from YouTube and took the initiative to learn the pronunciation. As explained by Student E: *"I would use Google to check the pronunciation, if the word is interesting, I also would see the country of origin of the word is from UK, or US, I can learn to pronounce it and remember it"*.

Both the groups of average achievers and low achievers reported using social strategies, compensation strategies and teacher's instructions for improving their pronunciation. Student H reported she improved her pronunciation by paying attention to sounds from her teacher's instruction. As she said: *"I don't really pay attention to pronunciation until I had a good English replacement teacher. She reminded us that we should pay attention to pronunciation and how to pronounce it correctly. Yes, after teacher mentioned it. We would try to memorise how to pronounce"*.

Strategies for Improving Grammar in English

The high achievers reported using metacognitive and cognitive strategies to improve their grammar. Student E used metacognitive strategies to pay more attention in grammar. As explained by Student E: *"I would pay extra attention to grammar and how it is used in sentences"*. Additionally, Student E also used cognitive strategies to analyse and deliberately memorise the grammar in the contexts and recognising how to use tenses in the contexts, as he said: *"I would see the structure of the sentences, grammar refers to time so the tenses show the different time of doing it. If I need to use it frequently, I would memorise it. Those three tenses that use more frequent ones I would use memorise"*.

The average achievers reported using memory and compensation, metacognitive, and cognitive strategies to improve their grammar. As explained by Student B: *"I will try to use it in Chinese first, before I use grammar in English. Do a lot of exercises and practice to earn experience from there. Some questions will repeat so I will learn from there. Yes, I will memorise"*.

The low achievers reported using cognitive strategies, memory strategies and teacher's instruction to improve their grammar. Student H used cognitive strategies for practicing exercises, memory strategies, and the teacher's instruction on how to use grammar. As explained by Student H: *"My grammar is not good. But teacher would*

teach us how to use tenses, how to use in the situation, so from Form Three onwards I have better idea about grammar". And "I would practice grammar in exercises, my teacher would give us intensive classes to improve our English. Yes, I memorise it".

Strategies for Improving Vocabulary in English

The high achievers reported using metacognitive strategies such as seeking exposure, self-monitoring, and identifying more vocabulary to improve their vocabulary. They were aware that word-for-word translation to comprehend information can be difficult to find the similar meaning between English and Chinese which are two totally different language families. As explained by Student D: *"Exposed to social media, my vocab expands from time to time"*. He also used the compensation strategy to find synonyms: *"I don't translate, I would break it down, understand each individual word and try to pierce them together, I use monolingual dictionary"*.

The average achievers reported using compensation strategies to get help from online applications and memory strategies to remember the sound of the vocabulary. As explained by Student A: *"There are many applications like games from China which can help to remember vocabulary. I would use speak to remember"*. Student C used compensation strategies, as she explained: *"I listen to English songs. Yes, it helps sometimes. When I like the song, I would check out the vocab that I don't understand. I think it is one of the ways to improve vocabulary"*.

The low achievers reported using compensation strategies such as to get help from Google, get a circumlocution or synonym to improve their vocabulary. As explained by Student G: *"If I came across any words, I don't understand I would google and check the meaning. Or when I was watching movies, I would check the meaning if I don't understand"*.

Discussion for RQ1

Oxford's (1990) classification system of strategies is subdivided into six various strategies according to their contribution in the process of language learning (Hardan, 2013). When a strategy is appropriately applied, it could effectively and efficiently enhance/facilitate the learners' learning. The findings show that differences between high achievers, average achievers, and low achievers lie in the range and number of strategies adopted, and how the strategies were applied to tasks and learning skills (Chamot et al., 1999; Chamot, 2004). In the learning process, high achievers are aware of their metacognition, they choose appropriate resources, monitor their progress, and evaluate their achievement in the light of predetermined purposes/learning objectives (Hardan, 2013; Werdiningsih et al., 2022). Conversely, the average achievers and low achievers are less aware of their processes and metacognition, therefore they are unaware/unclear of the purpose they have in mind

when they adopt a strategy. The use of a strategy is one of the main factors that differentiates the learning outcomes (Samperio, 2019), as knowledge of strategies is critically important for a learner (Nunan, 1999).

Among the six strategies, cognitive strategies were the most commonly used strategy by the high, average, and low achievers. Cognitive strategies relate to mental processes which help learners to understand and recall information that they have learned and to perform complex tasks (Oxford, 1990, 2017). The high adoption of cognitive strategies indicates that the ESL students used the cognitive strategies to compare elements in the target language such as grammar and pronunciation with their first language (L1). A comparison of cognitive strategies used by high achievers, average achievers and low achievers reveals that high achievers used more complex cognitive skills such as analysing, reasoning and creating structures for input and output, recognising the patterns in reading, and repeating the reading task in reading (Oxford, 1990). High achievers tend to understand the overall texts that provide the meaning of the context which help them to understand the meaning using their processes (Samperio, 2019). The average achievers and low achievers tend to use lower-level skills such as summarising, getting ideas, and taking notes (Oxford, 1990) to improve their reading skills and to accomplish reading tasks. They were not aware that the strategies they used were not fully oriented to their purposes/learning goals and did not meet their learning needs. That is to say, the learners of different proficiency levels may use similar strategies, but the outcomes they gain reside in the way they apply the strategies (Green & Oxford, 1995; Samperio, 2019).

Significantly, metacognitive strategies were the most used strategies by the high achievers. These findings align with the literature review of other studies that high achievers have a more proactive and metacognitive behaviour (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Hong-Nam & Page, 2014; Lee & Heinz, 2016; Macaro, 2001; Nhan & Lai, 2012; Oxford, 2017; Sanchez, 2019; Young, 2018). The use of metacognitive strategy is highly influenced by the proficiency level of the target language, experience, and age (Richards et al., 2002). According to Brown (2000), many instructional contexts around the world do not encourage risk-taking, but rather, focus on being correct and withholding right answers. Learners are unwilling to take risks or make mistakes in order to learn. Nonetheless, the high achievers who have a greater repertoire of English resources for circumlocution are more likely to be risk-takers who would try using whatever resources of the target language they have rather than switching to their native language. Additionally, the high achievers are motivated to learn and they have metacognitive behaviour, so they tend to use more metacognitive strategies such as planning, seeking practice, self-monitoring, setting goals, paying attention, identifying information, overviewing in reading, and self-evaluating (Tang, 2015). As Rubin (1975) pointed out, good language learners always seek out

opportunities to practice and they have a strong desire to communicate or to learn from a communication.

The reason that the average achievers and low achievers often used compensation and memory strategies is closely related to their English proficiency. The average achievers and low achievers' beliefs about the learning of English were often as a subject consisting of a list of vocabulary and a set of grammatical rules to be memorised, rather than a set of integrated skills and subskills (Oxford, 2001 as cited in Akbari, 2015). As a result, they used compensation strategies to make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar and vocabulary (Oxford, 2017). In brief, the average achievers and low achievers faced more difficulties in ESL learning due to their limited knowledge of the target language, but compensation and memory strategies were a great help to resolve this shortcoming (Yuan et al., 2004). These findings are aligned with the other past studies that identified that low achievers tend to use compensation and memory strategies frequently (Boggu & Sundarsingh, Normazidah et al., 2012; Oxford, 2011; Sanchez, 2019; Samperio, 2019; Sukying, 2021, Tang, 2015).

RQ2: How do the ESL students self-direct their English language learning outside the school with the use of language learning strategies?

Two themes were identified in relation to RQ2. These will be discussed in the following sections.

Self-directed Learning Practices

All the nine participants mentioned that they practised English outside the classroom by engaging in social media, watching English movies/videos, listening to songs, doing revision, and singing. As explained by Student D: *"I don't attend tuition, only engage in social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Video"*, Student F: *"I will speak more, read more. Attend tuition for exams only"*, and Student C: *"I watch cartoon and listen to songs to improve my English"*.

Among the nine participants, five of the participants including three high achievers, one of the average achievers, and one of the low achievers set long-term goals for mastering the English language and short-term goals for examination. As explained by Student E: *"I have a goal that is I hope I can master English well. To achieve the goal, I would learn from others, how they speak and pay attention to their speaking"* and Student C: *"Yes, when I sat for SPM, I would set a goal because I need to schedule my time"*.

Identifying the Purposes or Resources for English Language Learning

All the participants took the responsibility to self-direct their learning by identifying resources or purposes to improve their learning. Student D self-directed his learning

mainly through social media. As explained by Student D: *“Try to learn English in the environment where English is the main language. If you don't use English in school or with your friends, try to use it on social media more”*. Student A self-directed her learning beyond the classroom by immersing herself deliberately in singing and watching English dramas. As explained by Student A: *“I think they must like English. They must like English first so that they can find ways such as go to internet to learn from there, like singing, dramas, and playing games... I think it is not necessary to learn the traditional way like attend tuition etc. I think what we learn in school is not sufficient, learning English covers many areas but in school we can only learn limited things. They will teach the basic use and simple ways to use present tense, past tense etc, so it limits the interesting parts of English. English is not only used for those but it can be more fun”*.

Discussion for RQ2

Generally, self-directed learners possess the attributes of metacognitive, motivational and strategic control in their learning (Zimmerman, 1986). ESL learners who are self-directed are able to recognise their needs and they actively look out for opportunities to use the target language, while monitoring and taking control of their own learning in self-directed learning activities (Lee & Heinz, 2016). All the students indicated that they were aware that English is an important language. Therefore, they watched English movies, listened to English songs, surfed the net and they believed that English is a language that could keep them up-to-date on the latest information. More importantly, they had a positive view of English and they practised English outside the classroom to advance their language knowledge autonomously. A learner who perceives the importance of culture in learning the language might be more motivated to learn, and being aware of his/her English proficiency and needs, he/she would spend more time on English outside the classroom (Ni et al., 2008).

Knowles (1975) described self-directed learning as a linear process containing a series of steps towards a learning goal. In the process, learners take the initiative to learn, identify learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify human and material resources for learning, select and employ learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes. The findings reveal that all the students took the responsibility to self-direct their learning by identifying resources or purposes such as social media (Facebook, Instagram), singing, watching English drama, and English movies to aid learning. They took a role in establishing their own learning goals and diagnosed their needs. In the findings, five of the students set goals for their English language learning, indicating that they were already fairly autonomous in their learning and undertaking further steps or setting goals (Hawkins, 2018). Goal-setting of the five students evidently implies that they were using self-directed practices by acknowledging their needs to learn the target language (Grover et al., 2014).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, the high achievers often employed metacognitive and cognitive strategies for all their language skills. Contrastively, both average achievers and low achievers employed a wide range of strategies including cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, metacognitive, and social strategies. A difference between these two groups is that average achievers used metacognitive strategies more frequently than the low achievers. Interestingly, this finding is inconsistent with past studies that found high achievers using a wide range of strategies more frequently than low achievers (Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Hashim et al., 2018; Ni et al., 2008; Sanchez, 2019; Samperio, 2018; Sukying, 2021).

It can be concluded that the adoption of LLS is greatly influenced by the context and proficiency level of the students which essentially prescribes which LLS will be most effective (Chamot, 2004). As Castillo and Cordona (2014) have discussed, LLSs are correlated to metacognition and self-directed learning activities of the learners which include the abilities to infer, plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning competently. The use of strategies might be attributed to different factors such as the learning context, learning goals, learning needs, linguistic knowledge/level, and metacognitive knowledge of the learners. In general, learners who have good strategies in place are more likely to be more successful because they are motivated to learn and are willing to do what it takes to accomplish a task (Hedge, 2000). Therefore, it is essential to foster learners/students' metacognitive awareness in order to maximise their use of strategies and gear them towards self-directed learning.

It is important to note that the scope of this study was based on a sample size of nine participants to provide a specific insight into a unique context. Therefore, generalisation is not expected. Another limitation is that interviewing the participants was subjected to the limitations of individual reporting. Participants might not remember some of the details, or might describe what they perceived as the correct responses, or might make claims on their strategy use. Further clarification was made where possible.

The findings of this study have confirmed that ESL students of different proficiency levels adopt metacognitive strategies at varying frequencies and use different processes in the cognitive strategies. It is essential to help ESL students develop their metacognition which involves actively controlling cognitive processes using higher order thinking to engage in learning (Livingston, 2003, as cited in Parades, 2010). The findings suggest that the adoption of LLS is heavily influenced by the ESL students' language proficiency level and their language learning environment/context. Therefore, both the external factors (learning context and culture) and internal factors (learners' language proficiency level, learning objectives, and motivation factors) should be taken into consideration when studying the LLSs of ESL learners as these factors contribute to the field of LLS.

Future research should focus on developing learners' metacognitive awareness that will help them manage their own learning in order to make learning autonomous. In the process of acquisition and retention of knowledge, metacognition allows learners to self-direct/regulate and control task execution with the correct use of LLS (Ku & Ho, 2010). Consequently, learners will be more aware of the orchestration of their strategies that could assist them in learning how to learn and contribute to their success in acquiring a second or foreign language.

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