



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**FACTORS AFFECTING LESS PROFICIENT ESL LEARNERS' USE OF
STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE AND CONTENT AREA LEARNING**

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STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE AND CONTENT AREA LEARNING**

BY

ROSEMALA ISMAIL

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
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DEDICATED

TO

THE ONE AND ONLY

GREATEST LOVE OF MY LIFE

Abstract of thesis to be presented to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy



FACTORS AFFECTING LESS PROFICIENT ESL LEARNERS' USE OF STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE AND CONTENT AREA LEARNING

By

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The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that affect language strategies of ESL learners and use of language strategies in content area learning. The study was guided by three research questions: 1) What are the personal, home and institutional factors affecting English language learning among the less-proficient university students and how they affect the respondents in their English language learning?; 2) What are the language learning strategies (LLS) used by these respondents in the language classroom and content area classroom?; 3) How do they employ language strategies in attending to content area subjects?

The qualitative research design which employed the case study method was used in conducting the study. One case site consisting of a group of seven students from the Business Management and Accounting Faculty in Universiti Darul Iman Malaysia (UDM) in Terengganu, Malaysia was chosen. The pool of prospective respondents was chosen using purposive sampling technique. The selection of the respondents was based on the following criteria: 1) they were in their second semester of their studies; 2) they were studying in the ESL program; 3) they were also studying in the Business



Management Program and 4) they scored 45 points and below for their English course at the end-of-first semester.

The primary data collection technique employed in this case study was the interview. Observations were also made during the lectures and documents that include handouts and notes taken by the respondents were reviewed and analyzed to supplement the data collection. The data were analyzed according to categories and themes and the findings were presented according to each research question. The research questions provided a thematic analysis of the transcripts. Triangulation, peer examination and member check were subsequently used to validate the study.

The findings showed that there were three contributing factors affecting students' learning strategies and had been categorized as student factor, home factor, and institutional factor. In each category the research reported on what were considered by learners as facilitating factors and inhibiting factors. Facilitating factors promote motivation to learn the language while the inhibiting factors prohibit language learning. Furthermore, the themes of the language strategies acquired by the less-proficient students can be briefly categorized under two broad strategies: self-initiating and peer-based. It was also found that the teacher factor was an important influence on students' motivation to learn about the language but not on the choice of language strategies used by the students. This suggests that language strategies may have been fossilized earlier, and teachers therefore need to instill in more direct and consistent ways on how new strategies for language learning and content area learning can be adopted. When learning



their content area subjects, it was found that the students grappled with the content, and adopted strategies such as memorization, peer discussion and reference to seniors. They sought peers and seniors as sources of reference mostly to help clarify concepts which may be in English or Malay. The students showed low engagement in active production and discourse of ideas in English.

In terms of theoretical and practical implications, this study had identified that there is a gap between the language skills the educators are providing the students in the English classroom and what they actually need to attend to in the content area learning. Students did not see the connection and usefulness of the language classroom and the role played by the language strategies in helping them with content area subjects particularly in helping them to understand, clarify, apply and extrapolate tasks given. In order to close the gap, this study has developed a model of an integrated approach to learning which combines the teacher factor, relevant and meaningful curriculum, and support amongst peers. The model is called the Integrated Content Area-Language Learning Strategies (ICALLS) model. This model is believed to be able to promote and upgrade not only the teaching of language but also to enhance the students' content area subject learning.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**FAKTOR-FAKTOR YANG MEMPENGARUHI PELAJAR-PELAJAR YANG
KURANG FASIH BERBAHASA INGGERIS DALAM PENGGUNAAN
STRATEGI PEMBELAJARAN BAHASA DAN SUBJEK KHUSUS**

Oleh

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Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk meneliti faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi pelajar yang kurang mahir dalam pembelajaran bahasa kedua dalam konteks penggunaan dan aplikasi strategi bahasa dalam subjek-subjek khusus. Kajian ini berpandukan kepada tiga soalan kajian: 1) Apakah faktor-faktor peribadi, rumah dan institusi yang mempengaruhi pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan pelajar universiti yang kurang fasih berbahasa Inggeris dan bagaimanakah faktor-faktor ini mempengaruhi pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris mereka?; 2) Apakah strategi pembelajaran bahasa (SPB) yang digunakan oleh responden dalam kelas bahasa Inggeris dan dalam subjek khusus?; 3) Bagaimanakah mereka menggunakan strategi bahasa ini dalam subjek-subjek khusus?

Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan melakukan kajian kes. Satu kajian



kes yang terdiri daripada sekumpulan tujuh orang pelajar dari Fakulti Pengurusan Perniagaan dan Perakaunan Universiti Darul Iman Malaysia di Terengganu telah dipilih. Pemilihan responden adalah berdasarkan kriteria berikut: 1) mereka yang berada dalam semester kedua pengajian; 2) mereka yang mengikuti Program Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua; 3) mereka yang mengikuti Program Pengurusan Perniagaan dan 4) mereka yang memperoleh 45 markah dan ke bawah dalam kursus bahasa Inggeris pada akhir semester pertama.

Teknik utama pengumpulan data dalam kajian ini ialah secara temuduga. Pemerhatian juga dilakukan terhadap responden semasa mereka mengikuti syarahan. Dokumen-dokumen seperti nota dan bahan-bahan edaran yang diperolehi oleh responden turut dikaji dan dianalisa sebagai data tambahan. Data dianalisa mengikut kategori dan tema, dan dapatan dibuat mengikut setiap soalan kajian yang diajukan. Soalan kajian membantu analisa tema transkrip. Triangulasi, penilaian rakan sebaya dan semakan ahli digunakan untuk mengesahkan kajian.

Dapatan menunjukkan terdapat tiga faktor penyumbang yang mempengaruhi strategi pembelajaran para pelajar dan dikategorikan kepada faktor pelajar, faktor rumah dan faktor insitisi. Bagi setiap kategori tersebut, kajian melaporkan apa yang dianggap pelajar sebagai faktor-faktor pendorong dan faktor-faktor penghalang. Faktor pendorong memberikan mereka motivasi untuk belajar bahasa Inggeris manakala faktor penghalang membantutkan pembelajaran bahasa tersebut. Selain daripada itu, tema strategi bahasa yang digunakan oleh pelajar yang kurang mahir boleh dikategorikan kepada dua, iaitu:

pengaruh penting yang mendorong pelajar bersemangat untuk belajar bahasa Inggeris dan bukannya untuk pemilihan strategi bahasa yang digunakan oleh pelajar. Ini menunjukkan bahawa strategi bahasa sudah pun terbentuk lebih awal dalam kalangan pelajar. Oleh yang demikian, guru-guru perlu menerapkan strategi baru dalam pembelajaran bahasa dan pembelajaran subjek-subjek khusus dengan secara langsung dan lebih konsisten. Ketika mempelajari subjek-subjek khusus, pelajar di dapati sukar untuk menguasai isi dan mereka mengamalkan strategi seperti menghafal, diskusi rakan sebaya dan merujuk kepada pelajar di peringkat yang lebih tinggi sebagai sumber. Mereka berbuat demikian untuk mendapat penjelasan konsep sama ada dalam bahasa Inggeris ataupun Melayu. Para pelajar didapati kurang menggunakan bahasa Inggeris dalam perbincangan dan mengutarakan idea.

Dari segi implikasi teori dan amalan, kajian ini dapat mengenal pasti bahawa terdapat jurang di antara kemahiran bahasa yang cuba dilatih oleh pendidik kepada para pelajar dalam kelas bahasa Inggeris dengan apa sebenarnya yang perlu diberi tumpuan oleh para pelajar dalam pembelajaran subjek khusus. Pelajar tidak dapat melihat hubungan dan faedah kelas bahasa dan peranan strategi bahasa untuk membantu mereka dalam subjek khusus terutamanya untuk memahami, menghurai, mengguna dan mengekstrapolasi tugas yang diberi. Dalam usaha merapatkan jurang ini, kajian ini telah mencipta satu model pendekatan bersepadu dalam pembelajaran yang menggabungkan faktor guru, kurikulum yang bertepatan dan bermakna, dan sokongan dari rakan sebaya. Model ini dinamakan “Integrated Content Area-Language Learning Strategies” (ICALLS). Model



ini dipercayai boleh memajukan dan mempertingkatkan bukan sahaja pengajaran bahasa malahan juga mampu mempertingkatkan pembelajaran subjek –subjek khusus.



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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 26 December 2008 to conduct the final examination of Rosemala Ismail on her Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “Factors Affecting Less Proficient ESL Learners’ Use of Strategies for Language and Content Area Learning” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends the candidate be awarded with the Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institutions.

ROSEMALA ISMAIL

Date:



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELP	English Language Program
EL	English Language
ELL	English Language Learner
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESP	English for Specific Purpose
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
LL	Language Learning
LLS	Language Learning Strategies
SILL	Strategy Inventory for Language Learning
SLL	Second Language Learning
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the study, statement of the problem, objectives of the study, significance of the study, scope of the study, limitations of the study and definition of terms.

Background of the Study

In recent years there has been a steady growth of research in the field of language learning (Ellis, 1994; Abraham & Vann, 1987; Cohen, 1998; Brown, 2000; Bremner, 1999; Gu, 2002; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Norris-Holt, 2001, 2002; Oxford, 1989; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Varghese, 2004). Among the major areas of interest of the researchers are the Teaching and Learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) and Language Learning Strategies (LLS).

In the literature, the term language learning strategy refers to techniques, tactics, cognitive abilities and problem-solving processes for language learning. Generally learning strategies refer to "the cognitive processes that learners employ in completing language activities" (Nambiar, 1998). According to Oxford (1989, p.1)

Learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which are essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence.



As stated by Nambiar (1998), the term learning strategies consists of three different phenomena: 1) learning strategies refer to the behaviors that the language learner adopt while in the process of learning a language, for instance, the learner could introspect or give an account of what is happening in his head while performing a language task or activity; 2) learning strategies refer to the knowledge that the learner discloses while restrospecting how the language learning processes take place. In other words, the learner could, during the interview for instance, make known of all the techniques or strategies used in the course of learning a language; 3) learning strategies refer to the learner's background knowledge that has the impact on the choice of strategies used that is the learner could recognize and describe whether his proficiency could influence the usage of learning strategies in language learning.

A study done by Bremner (1999) on the levels of strategy used on a group of students studying a language and communication skills course at the City University of Hong Kong revealed that there are significant relations between proficiency level and the use of certain strategies. The high use of strategies like cognitive and compensation is more common in better students. The students with higher levels of proficiency are able to do more things readily like using words in more ways, watching more English movies, writing more notes and asking more questions. They are aware of the strategies they use and the reason for using them (Abraham & Vann, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Thus they are able to tailor the strategies towards their language needs. Students with lower proficiency level, on the other hand, can describe and identify their strategies but



are unable to choose and apply the right strategies for the right tasks. In other words, they have difficulties in manipulating the strategies to make them more successful in attending to the tasks (Block, 1986; Galloway and Labrca, 1991; Stern, 1975; Vann & Abraham, 1990).

As observed by Green and Oxford (1995) the majority of the strategies used more frequently by more successful learners involved active language use. Goh and Kwah (1997) in their study on variation among learners of different levels of proficiency, found that the proficiency level of the students had a significant influence on the use of two categories of learning strategies: cognitive and compensation across different context of use.

In subject content areas, LLS is important since its flexible usage enables better understanding of content area subjects. Research has found that ELL students need to be given special assistance in both the English language and subject-specific knowledge so that LLS are more easily cross used or transferred. Varghese (2004) claims that a collaboration between the content area teachers and English language specialists is important to integrate better focus on contextualized skills and language.

Stern (1975) pointed out three main problems faced by a student learning a new language, namely 1) the dominance of the first language as reference system in contrast to the new underdeveloped reference system, 2) having to pay attention to both linguistic forms and communication simultaneously-which is not possible especially for students



who have low aptitude in language learning, 3) having to choose between learning rationally and intuitively. Success or failure in language learning thus depends on the ability of the student in tackling each of these problems. The way he/she encounters the problem can distinguish whether he/she is a good or a poor language learner.

Exposure to a variety of language learning strategies through a well-designed learning strategy instruction (Rost, 1993) is believed to be able to facilitate L2 learning strategies. It is also believed that L2 learners can be taught to use specific strategies to facilitate the language learning (Chamot, 1990). The learners, during the learning process, develop learning strategies consciously and these learning techniques are used to facilitate their learning.

According to Bialystok and Frohlich (1978), the use of strategies can be trained through instructions to improve language learning and thus any novice L2 learner can improve language learning by using appropriate strategies with the help of proper learning strategy instruction (Dreyer and Oxford, 1996). Studies done by Oxford (1990) and Oxford-Carpenter (1989) also claim that learning can be facilitated by the proper use of learning strategies.

Studies by Chamot and Kupper (1989), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Wenden and Rubin (1987) have concluded that effective learners use strategies appropriate to the context more often than the less effective learners. They adopt different methods in order to maximize their learning results (Gu, 1996). Studies done by Bialystok and Frohlich