

PREFERRED STRATEGIES USED BY PEKANBARU SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO LEARN PRODUCTIVE SKILLS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract. The objective of this study is to investigate how Pekanbaru senior high school students learn productive language skills (speaking and writing). One of the definitions of language learning strategies is defined by Oxford (1990b). She states that language learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more efficient. The needed data were collected by interviewing 10 selected students from five ethnic groups (Malay, Minang, Javanese, Batak, and Chinese) at various senior high schools in Pekanbaru. The respondents were asked to answer the following question: If you are asked to increase the productive language skills, what do you do? Inter-rater reliability was used to judge the answers of related respondents in the interview by the qualified inter-raters-that are master's degree in TEFL. The inter-raters modified the respondents' responses in casual English into acceptable written English without changing the concept of the expression. The highest frequency has been acknowledged. There are a lot of strategies identified as the most-preferred strategies employed by the respondents to increase the productive skills. The use of these strategies can be grouped into once-mentioned, twice-mentioned, and more than twice-mentioned. Examples of strategies mentioned more than twice for improving speaking skills, preparing as much vocabulary as possible (four times); and for improving writing skill, the strategy of writing procedurally (three times). Suggestions for further study are those the successful learners, less successful learners, and gifted learners should also be taken into account as crucial factors to investigate in the near future.

Keywords: *The Preferred Strategies, Senior High School, Productive Skill*

INTRODUCTION

The language learners-limited to senior high school students-zeroed in on two important language learning targets: (a) the use of English and (b) the score in the final national examination, as stipulated in the 2004 GBPP (Departemen Pendidikan & Kebudayaan, 2004). The current curriculum provides a framework for developing the ability to use English. Learners have to adopt the genre of the text-descriptive, narrative, procedure, explanation, discussion, exposition, review, news items, etc., before they practice speaking and writing as required by the 2006 GBPP (Departemen Pendidikan & Kebu-

dayaan, 2006). In addition, they are also asked to master the materials offered in the final national examination (35 items for reading and 15 items for listening). To achieve both targets, the students employ certain language learning strategies in the classroom, out of the class, and in the national examination.

The students normally do what the teachers assign to them, such as underlining the different language expressions in the text book; finding the meaning of certain words (conceptual, structural, and contextual words) in the dictionary (Nuttall, 1982); and identifying types of questions linked to the written text. They are also asked to

read authentic materials form certain English newspapers (*The Jakarta Post* and *The Indonesia Times*) and magazines (*Hello*). A few months before the national examination, the learners are given a break-through program.

Several studies have shown that the use of language learning strategies (LLS) have made the learning of a language (in this case, English) more efficient and produced a positive effect on the learners' use of it (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Chamot 2004; Oxford, 1996; Cohen, 1998). Thus, the right choice of language learning strategies allows learners to improve their proficiency, overall achievement, or specific language skill areas (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Oxford & Crookall, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

DEFINITIONS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

A very basic element in defining language learning strategies is the concept of the strategy itself (Chesterfield 1985). Various definitions of LLS have been formulated by researchers in relation to English as a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL).

Some researchers use other terms for the word 'strategy', such as: (a) steps and operations (Oxford 1989); and (b) any specific action (Oxford, 1990b). To a certain extent, the same can be said about other researchers (Ehrman, 1989; Nyikos 1987, 1993; Chamot 1987, 1990; Donato & McCormick, 1994; Abdullah Hussein El-Saleh El-Omari, 2002).

Rubin (1975) defines language learning strategies as the techniques or devices that learners use to acquire second language knowledge. Stern (1975) calls them some general order of higher approaches to learning which govern the choice of specific techniques. Naiman et al (1978) define LLS as more or less deliberate approaches to learning. Rubin (1987) states that LLS are sets of operations, steps, plans, and routines of what

learners do to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information to regulate learning. Wenden & Rubin (1987) refers to them as behaviours, where learners engage in and regulate the learning of a second language. Chamot (1987) defines LLS as techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information.

Lan (2005) sees language learning strategies as terms applied to various behaviours used in learning: things people do that are relatively easy to change, vary according to their learning style, are effective or ineffective for specific situations, and are frequently under some level of conscious control. Some learning strategies are specific to each of the four language skills.

To summarise, constructing the definitions of language learning strategies includes various key elements, such as the context of using the strategies, the target of learning the language, and the suitable steps to be taken by the learners. These elements are reflected in the various LLS that have been formulated by experts such as Tarone (1983), Rubin (1975), Oxford (1989), Ellis (1994), Green & Hetch (1993), Mohammad Amin (2000), and Lan (2005).

CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

In several noted research activities, the term 'language learning strategies' reveals at least in four different expressions: (a) learner strategy (Wenden & Rubin, 1987), (b) learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994), (c) language learning strategies (Oxford 1990a, 1996; Abdullah Hussein El-Saleh El-Omari, 2002), and (d) learning strategies and/or learning behaviours (Mohamed Amin Embi, 2000).

Wenden (1987) classifies language learning strategies into at least six elements: (a)

specific actions or techniques, (b) observable activities, (c) problem-oriented characteristic, (d) direct or indirect contribution to learning, (e) automatic application after prolonged and repeated usage, and (f) behaviours that are amenable to change. Similarly, Lessard-Clouston (1997) created four reference criteria: (a) learner-generated activities (steps taken by the learners), (b) learner-enhanced language learning or help in developing language competence, (c) learners' visible actions (behaviours, steps, techniques, etc.) or unseen things (thought and mental processes), and (d) the involvement of information and memory of the learners.

According to Oxford (1990b), language learning strategies (a) contribute to the main goal—communicative competence, (b) allow learners to become self-directed, (c) expand the role of teachers, (d) are problem-oriented, (e) are specific actions taken by the learner, (f) involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive, (g) support learning directly or indirectly, (h) are not always observable, (i) are often conscious, (j) can be taught, (k) are flexible, and (l) are influenced by various factors.

Cohen (1996) suggests that language learning strategies (a) have the explicit goal of assisting learners in improving their knowledge; (b) include cognitive processing strategies, strategies for solidifying newly acquired language patterns, and strategies to determine the amount of cognitive energy needed; (c) encompass language performance and communication strategies; and (d) can be further differentiated into cognitive, metacognitive, affective, or social.

RESEARCH METHOD

There were 10 interview respondents out of the 400 students, who were chosen purposively by considering various factors, including gender, ethnicity, parents' economic background, academic background, and type of school.

Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research designs when the researcher is seeking people or other sampling groups. The researcher selects a person or site to be included in the study because the person or site is thought to be typical of the study being investigated (Keyton, 2006). Table 1 shows the profile of the interview respondents.

Table 1 Profile of the Interview Respondents

No.	Factors	Sub-factors	Number
1.	Gender	Male	3
		Female	7
Total			10
2.	Ethnicity	Riau Malay	2
		Minangkabau	2
		Javanese	2
		Batak	2
		Chinese	2
Total			10
3.	Parents' Economic Background	High	5
		Medium	5
		Low	None
4.	Academic Background	Natural Science	6
		Social Science	4
Total			10
5.	Type of School	State School	6
		Private School	4
Total			10

The purpose of all research interviews is to obtain certain kinds of information. The purpose of the explanatory interview is essentially heuristic: to develop ideas and research hypotheses rather than gather facts and statistics (Openheim, 2000). Interviewing, one of the most common and powerful ways to try to understand human beings, has a wide variety of forms and a multiplicity of uses. The most common type is individual, face-to-face verbal interchange, but it can also take the form of face-to-face group interviewing, mailed or self-administered questionnaires, and telephone surveys. The interview can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

In this study, 10 students (purposively selected from the sample) were interviewed about how they learned English in general and their individual English language skills. Each of them was called to give responses on three parts of the interview protocol, Parts A, B, and C. Their responses were directly written down in the space below the questions. Most of them responded in English and the rest, in Bahasa Indonesia. Part A was about learning English in general; Part B, the four individual language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing); and Part C, two individual language components (vocabulary and structure). The responses that were in Bahasa Indonesia were translated into English. The findings of the study will be quoted verbatim from the interview transcript to strengthen the basis arguments.

The interviews were conducted on the 10 students who were selected from the five ethnic groups (Malay, Minangkabau, Javanese, Batak, and Chinese). They were assigned to another venue soon after the questionnaires had been collected. Before they were asked questions, the respondents were given background questions to answer. The questions were designed to find out general strategies for learning English and individual language skills. The students were

interviewed two at a time, according to their ethnicity. The interviews were taped.

The 10 students tapped for purposive sampling were interviewed about the ways they learned English in general and their language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, structure, and vocabulary). Their responses were directly written down in the space below the questions; most were in English language and some, in Bahasa Indonesia. The responses that were in Bahasa Indonesia were translated into English.

The findings were used to support the quantitative data. The analysis examined indicators related to the language strategies used by the students. In general, the analytical steps were based on Miles and Huberman (1994): affixing codes, noting reflections or other remarks, sorting, and shifting to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups and common sequences; isolating these patterns and processes, commonalities and differences; elaborating a small set of generalisations, and confronting those generalisations (Miles & Huberman 1994).

Furthermore, the process of data interpretation was interactive and involved data reduction, examination, and conclusion verification by: looking for comments that described the ways language skills were acquired, looking for comments that indicated strategies of language learning, and looking for new strategies that may not have been included in this study.

DATA PRESENTATION

Strategies used to improve speaking skills, by gender

Both female and male students use the strategy of preparing vocabulary as much as possible before speaking as the highest-frequency strategy. For example, both R2 and R7 say that they will prepare as much vocabulary as possible. It seems

that both female and male students concentrate on mastering as many vocabulary items as possible before they speak. Female and male students also used a somewhat similar strategy: using their own sentences based on the main point they had heard and rephrasing it in their own words) but infrequently. On average, female students used just 2.8 strategies, while male students used 4.5 strategies.

Strategies used to improve speaking skills, by ethnicity

The strategies used by the five ethnic groups are to improve their English speaking skills. Two groups (Batak and Chinese) used similar preferred strategies: trying to speak what is known clearly (Batak) and being active in speaking (Chinese). Two other groups (Malay and Minangkabau) also used a similar preferred strategy: preparing as much vocabulary as possible beforehand. The common thread is that these students pay attention to how to do speaking activities. For example, R6 says, 'I try to speak what I know clearly', and R8 says, 'I'll follow the speech, if the topic is not so important for me.' In contrast to the other groups, Javanese students did not have a preferred strategy among the six strategies.

All groups except Javanese tend to start speaking by using familiar ideas. Mastery of ideas is supported by understanding of vocabulary items and knowledge about the topic; in other words, these students combine the three aspects as basic elements of speaking activity. On the other hand, Javanese students used different strategies from the other groups: as a preferred strategy, they spoke English with friends.

The five ethnic groups' average number of strategies used ranges from 3 to 4.5. The highest average is seen in Minangkabau students (4.5 strategies), and the lowest in Chinese students (three).

Strategies used to improve writing skills, by ethnicity

The Strategies used by the five ethnic groups are to learn writing skills, broken down by ethnicity. All five ethnic groups (Batak, Chinese, Javanese, Malay, and Minangkabau) tend to use similar strategies at the highest frequency: discussion with friends to find the conclusion, discussing the topic with friends (Batak); enjoying writing (Chinese); finding an interesting topic, finding the fact or main idea of a text and expressing it in writing (Javanese); developing ideas to write (Malay); and composing a piece of writing by collaborating with friends (Minangkabau). The common thread is that these students paid attention to how to write a piece of composition by collaborating with their friends. They discussed their ideas before continuing to write. For example, R8 says, 'I'll discuss the topic or do brainstorming', and R4, says, 'I find the fact and add opinion to develop it. In addition, the five ethnic groups use an average number of strategies ranging from 3.5 up to 5. The highest average is among Batak (five strategies), and the lowest among Chinese (3.5).

Strategies used by the respondents to improve speaking skill based on parents' income

The strategies that there are several strategies used by the respondents (on both groups) are to improve speaking skill, which vary by parents' income. First of all, students with high-income parents used the strategy of preparing as much vocabulary as possible to speak and doing their best to speak as the two most-preferred strategies. Students with medium-income parents used the preferred strategy of doing their best to speak. For example, R9 says, 'I'll do speaking without any hesitation', and R7 says, 'I'll practice my English making a conversation with friends.'

Both groups of students find it easier to speak when they know more vocabulary items. In other words, mastering vocabulary gives these

students confidence to speak and converse with friends. The average number of strategies practiced by students with medium family income is 3.8, while for students with high family income it is 3.2.

Strategies used to improve writing skills, by parents' income

Students with high-income parents use the preferred strategy of gathering sources related to a topic. Students with medium-income parents instead used the preferred strategy of developing ideas to write. For example, R6 says, 'I find an interesting topic', and R8 says, 'I will think the object and develop about it.'

It seems that both groups of students put an emphasis on interesting ideas to write instead of on language aspects. They are familiar with the suggestions from English teachers and other subject teachers about what to write rather than how to write. The students are sometimes equipped with materials by those teachers. Both group of students practiced a similar strategy of trying to imagine the object from the lecturer, but least frequently. For example, R7 says, 'I'll try to imagine the object and develop the object'. The average number of strategies practiced by students with medium-income parents is 5.4, while that of students with high-income parents is only 4.6.

Strategies used to improve speaking skills, by type of school attended

Both groups of students try to improve speaking skill based on types of school. The private-school students chose the preferred strategy of finding interesting ideas to explain in class, while the state-school students used preparing as much vocabulary as possible to speak. For example, R2 says, 'I will prepare any vocabulary to speak', R3 says, 'I will prepare a lot of vocabulary items and practice in speaking', and R4 says, 'I prepare a lot of vocabulary items.' In addition, both groups of students use a similar

strategy as a second priority to improve speaking skill, namely practicing speaking whenever possible and speaking English with friends, respectively. For example, R7 says, 'I'll practice my English by making a conversation with friends', and R9 says, 'I'll speak without any hesitation.'

Most students put priority on understanding the meaning of vocabulary items before speaking activity. The understanding of new vocabulary items will be the basis for activities like expressing ideas in English, getting involved in conversation, and using English expressions whenever possible. State-school students used 3.2 strategies on average, while private-school students used 3.3.

Strategies used to improve writing skills, by type of school attended

The strategies used to improve the writing skill vary by type of school attended. The two groups of students did not use similar strategies as their highest-frequency strategies. Respectively, their preferred strategies were writing procedurally (private-school students) and developing ideas to write (state-school students). For instance, R1 says, 'after I develop an idea I try to speak and write it as many as possible', R2 says, 'I will search a problem to write', R3 says, 'I write what it is known', R4 says, 'I find an interesting topic', R5 says, 'I'll make a bubble network and choose an interesting topic and I'll find the fact or main idea of a text and compose it sentences', and R7 says, 'I'll imagine the object and develop the object.' The two groups of students chose a similar strategy (making a bubble network) as their second-best strategy. For example, R5 says, 'I'll make a bubble network and choose an interesting topic and I'll find the fact or main idea of a text and compose it sentences.'

Most students from both groups put emphasis on 'what they have known' in order to write. This is commonly followed by making an outline of a composition in order to develop the

ideas. In addition, the students add to the ideas by collecting related data to support their knowledge of the topic. State-school students used 5.5 strategies on average, while private-school students practiced five strategies on average.

Strategies used to improve speaking skills, by academic stream

There are several strategies used by the natural science and the social science students to improve speaking skill. First of all, natural science students prefer two among their strategies, namely doing their best to speak in class and preparing as much vocabulary as possible to speak. For instance, R1 says, 'I find something to speak in class', R2 says, 'I'll prepare any vocabulary', R3 says, 'I prepare a lot of vocabulary items and practice in speaking', R4 says, 'I'll prepare a lot of vocabulary items', R5 says, 'I just make a short comic, make a short cartoon picture, and use English in the conversation', R6 says, 'I give an interesting topic', R7 says, 'I'll practice my English by making a conversation with friends', R8 says, 'I will try to tell what I think clearly', and R9 says, 'I'll do speaking without any hesitation.' Preparing as much vocabulary as possible to speak is also used as a highest-frequency strategy by social science students. For example, R2 says, 'I'll prepare any vocabulary', R3 says, 'I prepare a lot of vocabulary items and practice in speaking', R4 says, 'I'll prepare a lot of vocabulary items', R7 says, 'I'll practice my English by making a conversation with friends', and R9 says, 'I'll do speaking without any hesitation.' The groups did not use the same strategies as second-place strategies. The natural science students used the strategy of telling their experiences to friends by speaking English with them, while the social science students used the strategy of practicing speaking whenever possible. For example, R1 says, 'I find something to speak in class.' The two groups of students also used somewhat

similar strategies at the lowest frequency. These, respectively, are finding something to speak about in class and finding an interesting topic and developing it.

It seems that understanding the meaning of an adequate number of vocabulary items is regarded as the main strategy for speaking activity by both groups of students. Based on this understanding, the students have strong willingness to express their ideas in spoken form whenever possible. Finding an interesting topic is also an important strategy for speaking, and practicing what they have learned is a common strategy to make their speaking better than before. The natural science students used an average of 2.8 strategies, while the social science students used seven.

Strategies learned to improve writing skills, by academic stream

The strategies used by the natural and social science students are to improve their writing skills. Social science students had three preferred strategies: gathering sources related to the topics, developing ideas to write about, and doing writing procedurally. For example, R1 says, 'I usually write the ideas and choose the best one to write', R5 says, 'I'll find the fact or main idea of the text and compose it in sentences', R7 says, 'I'll imagine the object and develop the object', and R10 says, 'I'll share the ideas with my partner and I would discuss the topic first.' The natural science students used the strategy of writing procedurally as the preferred strategy. For instance, R1 says, 'I usually write the ideas and choose the best one to write', R5 says, 'I'll find the fact or main idea of the text and compose it in sentences', and R7 says, 'I'll imagine the object and develop the object.' In addition, both groups use somewhat similar strategies as their second choices: trying to write and trying to imagine the object and develop it, respectively. As well, both groups making a bubble network as their least-

frequent strategy.

Most of the students from both groups also employed other strategies in order to improve their writing skills. These were gathering ideas, discussing ideas with friends, constructing an outline, and developing two outlines by collecting certain facts to support the statements. Natural science students used 4.3 strategies on average, while the social science students used 4.7 strategies.

THE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The use of strategies in improving the productive language skills (speaking and writing)

There are a lot of strategies—9 are determined by gender; 28, by ethnicity; 9, by parents' income; 9, by types of schools; and 12, by academic streams—which are the most preferred in improving the productive English language skills. These strategies can be grouped under once-preference usage, twice-preference usage, and more than twice-preference usage, for all study factors.

More than twice-preference usage refers to the following strategies: (1) expanding the vocabulary to improve speaking skills (gender, ethnicity, parents' income, and academic streams); (2) to improve writing skills: reading certain aspects of the text to improve reading skills (gender, parents' income, and types of schools), developing ideas to write (gender, ethnicity, parents' income, types of schools, and academic streams), and gathering sources related to the topic (ethnicity [Minangkabau and Javanese] and parents' income). In other words, the respondents relied on the said strategies to improve their speaking, and writing skills. Indirectly, using these strategies also improves the vocabulary.

Twice-preference usage refers to improving vocabulary by using it in various language activities (types of schools and academic

streams); writing procedurally to improve writing skills (gender and types of schools); and learning structure through the understanding of the rules of language in improving grammar (ethnicity and types of schools). Even though these strategies deal with vocabulary and grammar directly, their usage has an indirect impact on the improvement of other language skills, such as speaking, and writing, due to the support function of vocabulary and grammar in the four language skills.

Once-preference usage involves improving the four language skills, as well as vocabulary and grammar. An example is the strategy of relaxing by listening to English music, used only by Batak students (ethnicity factor). This does not mean that only Batak students like to listen to English music; other students also do some listening, but not as often. Another example is the strategy of reading the stories in English textbooks, which is employed by students from middle-income families. This does not mean, however, that students whose parents have high income do not perform this activity. This strategy can be helpful since the content of the story and the language usage is relevant to load of the curriculum. Any of the rest of the strategies can be applied by the respondents in coping with their language learning problems.

In line with the findings on speaking and writing, Mohammed Amin Embi (2000) has reported several preferred strategies by Malaysian students to improve speech—conversing in English with friends (good learners) and asking for clarification from teacher (poor learners).

The implication of the finding

In this section, the implications of the study are reflected as the consequence of the findings. To raise the use of language learning strategies to quality of learning, several steps should be taken by the said agencies in the Education Department in Riau Province, Indonesia. Firstly, the quality

assurance board of education (LPMP) should include LLS as one of training programmes for a core group of English language teachers (MGMP) all over the province. These teachers are then expected to offer the LLS training materials to their counterparts in the regency level, who will, in turn, bring the concepts to their own school.

Secondly, Pekanbaru senior high school management should also make language learning strategies part of the practical training for their English teachers. Then, the English language teachers should go hand in hand with the English language learners. Several things can be done by English language teachers at the school level. For one thing, they should be exposed to the various LLS models; i.e. the models of O'Malley et. al.. (1985a), Oxford (1990), Mohamed Amin (1996 & 2000), and Macaro (2001). In addition, the teachers should formally explain the idea of each strategies to the students during school hours. The English language learners (students) should also ask about or discuss among themselves and with their teachers the broad concepts of each part and the idea behind each item.

CLOSURE

Eventhough, there have been a lot of strategies used to improve the productive language skills, it is possible to maximize other strategies. English language teachers should encourage the respondents in order they could create more strategies in learning speaking and writing.

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