Language Learning Strategy (LLS) Training Using an Online Tool

By

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Abstract

The use of language learning strategies (LLS) by language learners is one of the contributing factors to the success of second language learning. Studies on successful and less successful learners have concluded that effective language learners are aware of the strategies they use (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), have more repertoires of strategies at their disposal (Ting, 2006) and use more strategies in their learning process (Wu, 2008; Hamzah & Abdullah, 2009). The proponents of LLS believe that the use of LLS among language learners can be enhanced by raising the students' awareness of LLS and providing them with LLS training. They believe that LLS, especially indirect strategies can be taught. With the popularity of online social networking websites such as Facebook as the medium of communication among students, this study is conducted to investigate the potential of using Facebook Notes as LLS training tool. This study aims at investigating the effects of training in the use of indirect LLS by using Facebook Notes on the learners' overall indirect strategies use as well as their performance at the pre-writing stage. This paper details the process involved in the training of indirect LLS and how the students' awareness of indirect LLS was applied in the planning stage of writing which was outlining.

Keywords: *Language Learning Strategies, Facebook Notes, Process Writing, Indirect Strategies.*

1. Introduction

The use of language learning strategies (LLS) by language learners is one of the contributing factors to the success of second language learning. Studies on successful and less successful learners have concluded that effective language learners are aware of the strategies they use (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), have more repertoires of strategies at their disposal (Ting, 2006) and use more strategies in their learning process (Wu, 2008; Hamzah & Abdullah, 2009). The proponents of LLS believe that the use of LLS among language learners can be enhanced by raising the students' awareness of LLS and providing them with LLS training. They believe that LLS, especially *indirect strategies* can be taught. Although every learner by nature uses some kind of strategies in learning, it is believed that they can be trained to be more efficient in using LLS. With many research supporting LLS instruction, many types of training in the use of language learning strategies have been proposed in the language classroom. Since a study conducted by Tan, Ng and Saw (2010) discovered that Malaysian adolescents spend a great deal of their time outside school hours communicating via social networking websites, it is felt that training them on the use of indirect language learning strategies using an online tool would be fitting. Furthermore, 77.06% of the online activities the adolescents were involved in use English (Tan, Ng & Saw, 2010). This has motivated the researchers to explore the possibilities of LLS training being conducted online via Facebook Notes.

2. Overview of Related Literature

"Learning strategies" (Chamot, 1987); "learner strategies" (Wenden, 1987); "language learning strategies" (Oxford, 1989) are terms to describe techniques, approaches or actions that learners take deliberately in order to facilitate the learning of a new language. Many studies have discovered that the success in learning a language depends among others, on the strategies which the learner consciously or unconsciously employs in the learning process (Chamot, 1987). Naiman, Frolich, Stern and Todesco (1996) as cited by Macaro (2001, p.27) observe that successful learners describe themselves as "being actively involved in the learning process." Oxford (1990) considers LLS as tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Oxford (1990) summarises her view of LLS by listing several key features in addition to the general characteristics above. She states that LLS allow learners to become more self-directed, expand the role of language teachers, involve many aspects of learning (not just the cognitive), can be taught and is flexible. LLS are also influenced by a variety of factors.

Oxford (1990) divides LLS into two strategy groups of *direct* and *indirect* strategies. *Direct* strategies, those directly involve in learning the target language, are memory, cognitive and compensation. Memory strategies concern the storage and retrieval of new language. Cognitive strategies are the mental processes associated with manipulating, transforming, and interacting with the target language. Compensation strategies are utilized by learners to overcome deficiency in knowledge needed for understanding and production of the target language. *Indirect strategies* are those strategies which play a supportive role without being directly related to the interaction of the language itself. Strategies categorized within this group include metacognitive, affective, and social. Metacognitive strategies are aspects associated with planning, monitoring, and evaluating the target language. Affective strategies refer to strategies that learners employ to control emotions and attitudes about language learning. Finally, social strategies are characterized by facilitating engagement in the target language through interaction with others.

Language Learning Strategy Training
Several studies on LLS training found it to be of benefit such as O' Malley (1987); Thompson and Rubin (1993); Oxford (1994). As mentioned in the previous section, Oxford (1994) concluded that successful language learners often use strategies in an organized manner. Suthagar Narasiman (2007) in his study on the effect of LLS on reading comprehension discovered that explicit instructions improved the subjects' metacognitive knowledge and has a beneficial effect on the subjects' comprehension achievement. Based on these observations, proponents of LLS training have proposed that LLS training be included in L2 instructions. Graham (1997) suggested that L2 teachers should train the students to develop and use good LLS in learning while Neil Anderson (2002) proposed that the teaching of metacognitive LLS as part of language learning instruction is important since a strong metacognitive skills 'empower' ESL learners. He further stresses that the use of metacognitive strategies 'ignites' one's thinking and can lead to more insightful learning. The proponents of LLS training, like Anderson, believe that strategies can be taught. In Malaysia, Rajamoney (2008) who conducted a study among Form Four students highlighted that there is a need to conduct strategy training to promote awareness of LLS among the students and to enhance students' language learning.

Macaro (2001) has suggested three options for language teachers to consider in deciding the type of LLS training programme that is suitable for their particular group of learners. The three options are explained in Table 1.

Table 1: LLS Training Options

OPTIONS	Strategies/Skills for LLS training	Advantages	Disadvantages
OPTION 1	Metacognitive, Social and Affective learning strategies only	Easier for learner to articulate the strategies	Cover only *indirect strategies*
OPTION 2	Cognitive Strategies only	Has *direct* encounter with the foreign language learned	Difficult for learner to explain
OPTION 3	One process or skill such as reading or writing	Combine direct and indirect strategies. Awareness raising become tightly chanelled	None

The LLS training in this study is designed based on Macaro's Option 1. The study only focused on *indirect* strategies training which included awareness raising of metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Background of The Study

In MARA University of Technology (UiTM), one of the public universities in Malaysia, an academic writing course is offered to the third semester students for all diploma programmes at the university. The course employs the *process writing* approach and the students' work is evaluated and graded at every stage of the writing process. The term *process writing* refers to a non-linear model of writing approach. The four major stages of writing are pre-writing (planning), drafting, feedback and revising (editing). The first graded assignment is the '*outline*', followed by the '*first draft*' and finally the '*final essay*'. Before the students submit their 'outlines' to be graded they would submit their draft outline to be commented on by the class lecturers. Ideally, the lecturers would provide comments on their rough work to ensure that they are on the right track. After their outlines are reviewed and commented on, the students would revise their outlines and resubmit them to be graded. The same process is continued for the 'first draft' and the 'final essay'. This paper reports only the initial stage of the writing process which is 'outlining'.

Statement of the Problem

Many Malaysian undergraduates, despite having gone through at least eleven years of formal ESL instruction in schools, are found to have problems in academic writing due to numerous reasons (Adzmi, Bidin, Ibrahim et al., 2009; Osman & Bakar, 2009; Ting & Tee, 2008). This shows that the conventional method of writing instruction is not sufficient in improving the students' academic writing proficiency. Since training in the use of LLS has been proven to be beneficial, it is felt that out-of-class LLS training activities conducted online would be advantageous in assisting the students to be more effective and self-directed learners. Thus, this study is conducted to investigate whether training the students in the use of indirect LLS using Facebook Notes has any effect on the learners' LLS use in their academic writing class as well as their performance in the pre-writing stage.

Study Objectives and Research Questions

The first objective of this study is to investigate whether training in the use of indirect LLS using Facebook Notes improves the students' use of LLS and secondly, whether LLS training enhances the students' performance at a pre-writing stage of an academic writing process. The study hopes to address the following research questions:

> RQ1: Does training on the use of indirect LLS using Facebook Notes affect the use of LLS among the ESL learners?

RQ2:   Does training on the use of indirect LLS using Facebook Notes improve the students' the academic writing performance at pre-writing stage.

3. Methodology

The Participants
Forty students, twenty five females and fifteen males, from two intact groups participated in this study. They were semester three Diploma in Building students taking an academic writing subject at UiTM. The students' scores for English subject during Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education which is equivalent to 'O Level' or SPM) range from 'A' to 'D', with the majority scoring 'C' and 'D' grades. Table 2 below presents the participants' demographics.

Table 2: The Participants' Demographics

Particular	Number of participants Experimental Group	Number of participants Control Group
Male	4	11
Female	16	9
SPM Grade		
A	1	1
B	3	7
C	4	4
D	12	8

Study Design

The First Part of The Study
The design of the first part of the study is quasi-experimental with non-equivalent experimental and control group pre-tests and post-tests. It includes one independent (experimental) variable and one dependent variable. The independent variable is the LLS training proposed for this study versus conventional academic writing instructions for the students. The dependent variable is LLS use between pre and post experiment, measured through language learning strategy questionnaires (SILL). Table 3 below presents the design of the study.

Table 3: Design of the Study (The First Part)

Research Groups	Before the Experiment	Independent Variable	After the Experiment	Dependent Variables
Experimental Group	01	X	02	LLS use
Control Group	01		02	LLS use

Six weeks (18 two-hour sessions) Instruction / Training
(*Experimental Period*)

01= Pre experimental SILL questionnaires
02= Post experimental SILL questionnaires
X = treatment (LLS training)

At the beginning of the study period, the academic writing lecturer who participated in this study was briefed by the researcher on how to implement LLS training via Facebook Notes to the experimental group. As shown in Table 1, both experimental and control groups sat for pre-experimental SILL (Strategy Inventory of Language Learning) questionnaire at the beginning of the semester. After the pre-test, the experimental group received LLS training in addition to their normal instruction on academic writing and the subjects of the control group went through the normal academic writing class without LLS training. After the sixth week of the study period, the subjects from both groups were given the same instrument as post-test.

LLS training procedure
After sitting for the pre-test, the experimental group had to answer a questionnaire related to their Facebook accounts. The participants who did not have Facebook accounts were instructed to sign up and they were given time to familiarize themselves with Facebook features especially Facebook Notes.

The LLS training in this study was designed based on Macaro's Option 1. The study only focused on *indirect* strategies training which included awareness raising of metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The activities were designed to raise the students' awareness as well as introduce them to indirect LLS which could be used to enhance their language learning.

Since one of the objectives of the course was to write a term paper, most LLS training activities were aligned to the production of this end product. At the same time, the LLS training activities were embedded into class discussions and reading activities. Table 4 summarizes the activities done for the LLS training.

Table 4: Language Learning Strategy activities

Stages	In-Class Activities	Online Activities

Stage 1: Brainstorming	Topic Brainstorming [M]
	• First reading
	  o Highlight potential topics and ideas
	  o Library research
	• Mind mapping
	• Word Bank preparation
		Introduction to Facebook [S]
		• Assisting the students on the features of Facebook and Facebook Notes
		
		Feedback Training [M] [S]
		• Modelling good and weak feedback on sample outlines [M] [S]

Stage 2: Outlining	Outlining Procedure [M]
	• Writing research question
	• Developing a thesis statement
	• Writing good topic sentences
	• Supporting details
	• Extended reading:
	  o Finding relevant information from reliable sources
	  o Matching the information to the outlines
	  o Updating Word Bank
	• Revising outlines 1
	  o Refining sentence constructions
		Online Feedback
		Intervention or Feedback Exercise* [M] [S] [A]
		• Giving feedback by posting comments on the four different students' outlines published by the writing lecturer on his Facebook Notes
		• Responding to the feedback given by others – an interaction between the students whose outlines were chosen with the rest of

	before submission (*draft outline*) • Online Feedback Intervention or Feedback Exercise* • Revising outlines 2 　　o Revising outlines accordingly to the feedback given before resubmission (*final outline*)	the students and the writing lecturer
Stage 3: Drafting	Drafting Procedure [M] • Paraphrasing techniques 　　o Dictionary and thesaurus skills 　　o Word Bank reference 　　o Passive forms • In-text citations techniques Close Reading [M] • Cross-reference check 　　o Check the accuracy of paraphrased information synthesized from the articles and the draft Peer Review [M] [S] [A] • Exchanging drafts between pairs • Giving feedback orally in a group discussion • Revising drafts before submitting to the writing lecturer	
Stage 4: Revising	Revision of Drafts (Level 1) [M] [S] [A] • Writing lecturer's evaluation – written and orally Revision of Drafts (Level 2) [M] • Revising the drafts accordingly for the submission of the final draft which is the **Term Paper**	

[M] – Metacognitive
[S] – Social
[A] – Affective

This paper focuses on Stages 1 and 2 of the writing process and describes the activities involved during those stages only. A series of in-class and online LLS activities were integrated for the purpose of awareness raising among the students. Since writing a term paper was the main focus of the course, the initial stage of the activities was to strengthen students' ability in the planning of their writing. The activities started with brainstorming of some potential topics in the classroom. The activities were then extended outside the classroom when they were required to do library research on their potential topics. They were trained to develop a mind-map related to their topic and build their own Word Bank to enrich their academic vocabulary knowledge.

Throughout the study period, Facebook Notes was used as a platform for teacher-student and student-student interaction. Selected outlines were posted on the writing lecturer's Facebook Notes and the students were prompted into discussing the class activities online, outside class hours. These activities promote all the three *indirect* learning strategies which are metacognitive, social and affective strategies. Students learned through the interaction with others (social) at the same time, positive learning environment (affective) was promoted. The interaction via Facebook Notes includes providing feedback on ways to improve the selected outlines and discussing about their English language learning. This form of interaction promotes metacognitive learning strategy as the students planned the revision of their written work based on their peers' suggestions. In addition, as a part of the planning strategy (metacognitive), students were trained to read effectively in order to gather information for their research, thus, extended reading was introduced to the students in the pre-writing activity. Through extended reading activities, students were trained on effective reading skills. Among the activities include analyzing linear and non-linear texts, differentiating facts and opinions, making conclusions and inferences which later would be used as the supporting information for their writing. Table 5 summarizes the *indirect* strategies involved in the LLS training activities.

Table 5: Indirect Learning Strategies

Language Learning Strategy Activities	Indirect Strategies Involved		
	Metacognitive	Social	Affective
Discussion Activities (In and Out-of class)	√	√	√
Writing Activities (Planning, Drafting, Editing)	√	√	√
Reading Activities (Extended Reading)	√		

The Second Part of the Study
The second part of the study was feedback exercise conducted online via Facebook Notes which started on the third week of the study. Only the experimental group was involved in the feedback exercise. After the pre-writing activities the students prepared their outlines on the topic of their choice and submitted their draft outline to the writing lecturer. Then, the writing lecturer scored the outlines over ten marks and these marks were considered as marks for the pre-test. Four outlines were randomly chosen by the writing lecturer and the participants (eight students working in pairs) who wrote these outlines were considered as X Group and their outlines were posted and reviewed by their peers. The remaining students were considered as Y Group and they were the reviewers who would provide feedbacks and comments. Next, three tasks were designed to address three main parts of an outline. The first task (Task 1) was for the peer reviewers to look at *the development of the thesis statement*. The second task (Task 2) was for them to examine *the development of the topic sentences* from the thesis statement. Finally, the third task (Task 3) was for the reviewers to look at *the coherence of the paragraph*.

Each outline posted was accompanied by instructions which were carefully designed to ensure that participants were able to respond to the tasks given. Since the outlines were posted on the writing lecturer's Facebook Notes, the students had to add the writing lecturer as their 'friend' in order for them to have access to his Notes. Due to the open access provided by this social networking website, everyone who is the writing lecturer's 'friend' can have access to his Notes, too. Therefore, the writing lecturer had to specifically group the students in this study under a specific group and every 'Task' posted was set to specific privacy settings in which only the group members could view and respond to the notes published on his Facebook Notes. The group was assigned to a group called BN3F and to avoid overlapping of concepts in the discussion later, the students' feedback was termed as 'comment' aligned with the term used in Facebook.

Once everything was set, the participants were instructed to proceed with their online feedback exercise where they were required to respond to three tasks involved by posting comments on every task. Finally, the 'LIKE' function was used by the writing lecturer to highlight the useful comments made by student reviewers for the rest of the students to take note. After three weeks of online discussion, the students would revise and resubmit their final outlines to the writing lecturer to be graded.

4. Findings and Discussions

Analysis for SILL Questionnaire
The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for Microsoft Windows 12 was used for data analysis. A descriptive statistics procedure was implemented in order to investigate the use of learning strategies. The study adopted Oxford (1990) categorization of frequency of language learning strategies use as stated below:

Mean score of 1.0 – 2.4: Low strategy use
Mean score of 2.5 – 3.4: Medium strategy use
Mean score of 3.5 – 5.0: High strategy use
The mean of each strategy group used by the learners was computed and ranked based on the mean score between the categories and within the categories. Table 6 shows pre and post test control group overall SILL results.

Table 6: LLS used by Control Group

Language Learning Strategies	Min	Max	Ave. Mean Pre test	Level	Ave. Mean Post test	Level
Memory Strategies	1	5	2.75	Medium	2.85	medium
Cognitive Strategies	1	5	2.80	Medium	2.60	medium
Compensation Strategies	1	5	3.05	Medium	2.63	medium
Metacognitive strategies	1	5	2.75	Medium	2.95	medium
Affective Strategies	1	5	2.55	Medium	2.65	medium
Social Strategies	1	5	3.05	Medium	3.15	medium

The result shows that the mean average for pre and post tests for the control group varies. The participants were moderate users of all the six categories of LLS before and after the study.

Table 7: LLS used by Experimental Group

Language Learning Strategies	Min	Max	Ave. Mean Pre exp	Level	Ave. Mean Post exp.	Level
Memory Strategies	1	5	2.55	Medium	2.75	medium
Cognitive Strategies	1	5	2.70	Medium	3.10	medium
Compensation Strategies	1	5	3.15	Medium	3.10	medium
Metacognitive strategies	1	5	2.90	Medium	2.95	medium
Affective Strategies	1	5	2.65	Medium	2.90	medium
Social Strategies	1	5	2.8	Medium	3.10	medium

Table 7 shows LLS used by the experimental group for both pre and post tests. The results were observed to answer the first research question: "Does training on the use of indirect LLS using Facebook Notes affect the use of indirect LLS among the ESL learners?" It can be observed that the mean averages of the post tests for all the six categories are slightly higher than the pre test. However, all of the participants are still moderate users of all the six categories of LLS.

Analysis for 'Outline' Results

It was found that three out of the four outlines for X Group improved while the rest remained unchanged as shown in Table 8. This means, not all of the students whose essays were reviewed actually gained from the online feedback exercise. However, the Y Group showed overall improvement in the post-test marks. The marks displayed by the Y Group in Table 9 indicate that all four outlines that were not reviewed showed improvements in the post-test. This provides evidence that the reviewers whose outline were not reviewed also benefitted from this exercise.

Table 8: Pre and Post- Test Marks of the X Group

Title of Essays	Marks over 10	
	Pre- Test	Post- Test
"Buy Malaysian" Campaign	4	6
Obesity among Malaysian children	4	4
Social problems among teenagers caused by the social networking websites	4	6
The sports industry in Malaysia	4	6

Table 9: Pre and Post- Test Marks Y Group

Title of Essays	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Open burning and global warming	7	7.5
Reasons people commit suicide	7	7
The effects of using mobile phones on human health	4	5.5
The importance of having sex education in Malaysian education system	5	6

The participants in the Y Group were interviewed and their views were sought in relations to the benefit they perceived from the exercise. They generally agreed that engaging in the online feedback giving exercise provided them the opportunities to fine tune their pre-writing skills as well as improve their self-editing skills. The online discussions presented them with clearer picture of what should be done and how to do it well. In other words, giving feedback allows the student writers to enhance their own self-editing skills rather than relying on the feedback given by others. Excerpt 1 shows how one student in the Y Group was able to benefit from the feedback she provided to others. In response to her peers' outline in Task 2, Student 5 posted the following comment.

Excerpt 1: Benefit gained by feedback giver

Student 5 posted: *my opinion, main idea a and b are same meaning and the writer should use the suitable discourse marker to create the good main idea...*

Student 5's draft Outline:

Topic sentence A: The problem is the damage brain and memory.

Student 5's final Outline:

Topic sentence A: Firstly, one of the effects of this problem is the damage to brain and memory.

It can be seen from the excerpt that Student 5 followed her own advice and revised her outline accordingly. This finding confirms earlier study which discovered that reviewers also benefit from feedback giving exercise. For instance, Kristi Lundstorm and Wendy Baker (2009) discovered in their

study that the reviewers showed more significant improvement in their own writing compared to the receivers who depended solely on their peers' feedback to improve their writing.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that a social networking website such as Facebook has the potential to be used as LLS training tool in line with the current trend. Internet-savvy undergraduates in this study were observed to be enthusiastic with the training tool thus, began to use the indirect LLS more in their learning. It can be concluded that the use of Facebook Notes does promote the use of indirect LLS among college students in the study. The control group which did not go through LLS training did not show much difference in their LLS use before and after going through normal ESL instruction. The experimental group however proved that they used the LLS more after the training. This finding resembles findings conducted by earlier researchers such as O' Malley (1987); Thompson and Rubin (1993) in Oxford (1994); Lee & Oxford (2008) as well as Rajamoney (2008). This shows that although both groups use the same categories of strategies, post test results show that the experimental group learners use the strategies more frequently. The second part of the study showed that raising the students' awareness and promoting online discussion via Facebook Notes are advantageous to the ESL learners. The students can help each other to enhance their writing skill and the class writing lecturer can monitor and guide them in their learning process.

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