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## In Search of Commonly Used Language Learning Strategies by EFL students

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### Abstract

Language learning strategy is one of the factors that can contribute to the success in learning a foreign language including for Indonesian students. The purpose of this current study was to examine the learning strategies of English as foreign language students in one state university in Jambi Province. This current study used a survey approach to deal with the issue of the learning strategies of English as foreign language students. Data were collected through using the Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire (LLSQ). The participants of this study consisted of 129 students. Overall, the findings revealed that cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies were most commonly used by students in speaking, reading, and writing skills. However, cognitive and social strategies were the most frequently used by students for listening skill. Suggestions and future studies are also discussed.

### Keywords

Foreign language, language skills, language learning strategies, learning English

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## Introduction

English is one of the foreign languages used as a compulsory subject for students to study in high schools in Indonesia. As a foreign language, English certainly has vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and other language components that are not the same as Indonesian. They can cause constraints and obstacles for students to learn English. Constraints faced by college students, also certainly vary and they possibly can cause frustration and stress between them which of course will also indirectly affect the learning outcomes (Mukminin et al, 2018). In teaching and learning process, there are always learners who succeed well and there are also learners who are less successful. These are caused by various factors; one of them is the way of learning of people who learn it. As Naiman, Frohlich, Stem, and Todesco (1978, p. 1) stated that "All forms of language teaching can be well developed if we have sufficient knowledge about learners and about the teaching and learning process itself." Sharp (2004) also said that in the process of learning a foreign language, there are several factors that influence the success or failure of a person in learning, including age, sex, motivation, intelligence, learning strategies and learning styles that affect student academic achievement. Based on the statement from Naiman et al. (1978) and Sharp (2004), it can be inferred that the learning strategy is one of the most important factors in determining the success or failure of a student in learning a foreign language.

Many factors could influence the success or failure of a learner in learning English as foreign language. Those factors can be external and internal. The external factors are the factors that come from the outside of the learner, such as school location, availability of the textbook, and quality of lecturers (Mukminin, Muazza., Hustarna., & Sari, 2015; Mukminin et al., 2015). Whereas, the internal factors are the factors which lay within the learners themselves, such as motivation, interest in learning the language, and learners' strategies in learning the language. Since the learning strategies are also one factor which has a big contribution on the success in learning foreign language, so the lecturers or teachers should know what kinds of learning strategies that the learners have as learning strategies are very crucial for learners to make them active and confident in learning processes. Oxford (1990) states that learning strategies are the tools of active and self-directed involvement that is very important for developing communicative competence. So, if learners could apply the appropriate strategies in learning, it could result in the improvement of learners' proficiency and greater confidence.

Eventhough the studies related with language learning strategies have become the topic of many researchers around the world, (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Skehan, 1989), but in Indonesian contexts, this topic is still understudied (e.g., Mukminin et al., 2018) especially in Jambi Province. To fill the gap, this study attempted to contribute to the knowledge base by examining the learning strategies of English as foreign language students in one state university in Jambi Province. To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions guided the study: (1) what types of language learning strategies do English as foreign

language students use? (2) how is the language learning strategy choice of English as foreign language students in learning English as a foreign language in their university?

### Literature Review

Learning strategies are very crucial for the learners of a foreign language in order to make them more active and more confident during learning processes which will result in the success or failure in learning the foreign language. This is in line with the statements uttered by Oxford (1990) that learning strategies are the learners' steps in order to enhance their own learning. Crawford (1999, p. 9) also stated, "The learning strategies as the ways used by learners to improve their own learning." It can be stated that learning strategies are the conscious activities done by learners that intend to achieve the learning goals. If a learner consciously applies appropriate learning strategies, he/she can increase not only his or her proficiency and but also his or her confidence in learning a foreign language. Additionally, language learning strategies create learners to be a competent learner. Another reason why the strategies in learning language are important is because they are the tools of active and self-directed, involvement, which is crucial to improve and develop communicative competence (Oxford, 1990).

There are numerous classifications of language learning strategies proposed by many studies. The studies have proposed different learning strategies and different ways of grouping similar learning strategies (Setiyadi, 2016). O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Cohen (1990), and Oxford 1990 classify language learning strategies into four strategies, they are cognitive, meta-cognitive, effective, and social strategies. Cognitive strategy relates with learner's thinking skill in processing learning materials. Meta-cognitive strategy refers to the way of the learner to do the learning materials while the effective strategy refers to learners' behavior and feeling toward the learning processes. The social strategy is the strategy used among learners during the process of teaching and learning in order to achieve the learning goals. A quite old reference from Naiman et al. in 1978, which is based on Stern's (1975) study, classifies more specific learning strategies consisting of 10 learning strategies including plan, active, emphatic, formal, experimental, semantic, drill, communicative, observe, and understanding. Eventhough these strategies cover many activities but they still need a modification and confirmation. Another language learning strategies which are proposed by Oxford (1990) are direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are the language-learning strategies that directly involve the target language, such as performing at the stage play, working with the language itself in a variety of specific tasks. While indirect strategies are the language-learning strategies that do not directly involve the target language. Even though there are many classifications of language learning strategies, this study focused on three basic classification schemes proposed by Setiyadi (2016) which are used to identify language learning strategies implemented by EFL students. They are meta-cognitive, cognitive, and social strategies. Meta-cognitive strategy allows learners to control their own cognition – that is, to coordinate the learning processes by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating. Cognitive strategies such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, enabling

learners to understand and produce a new language by many different means. Social strategy helps learners learn through interactions with others.

## Methodology

### *Research design, participants, and locale of the study*

This study used a survey approach. To obtain data on learning strategies used by participants, we distributed closed-ended questionnaires. This research was carried out at the one English language study program, in one state university in Jambi Province. One of the reasons to take the site was mainly the access and permission that we got from the study site authorities. This study took 6 months from April to September 2019. We invited all students at the study site; however, the participants involved in this study were 129 students who were willing to fill out the questionnaire.

### *Data collection and analysis*

The instrument used in this study was the adoption of a questionnaire created by Oxford (1990) namely *Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire (LLSQ)*. Furthermore, in 2016 this questionnaire was adapted by Setiyadi (2016) and it was *created* to measure the learning strategy of tertiary level students especially for Indonesian students who learn English as a foreign language. This is one of the researcher's considerations to adopt this questionnaire as it has been revised for several times by the former researcher to gain its reliability and validity. Since this questionnaire was reliable and it was also piloted to Indonesian students at tertiary level, so it was not necessary anymore for the researchers to find its reliability anymore since the participants of this study were also the tertiary level students of English study program.

The questionnaire measures the students' learning strategy of the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and reading) in one sheet of questionnaire. It consists of 80 questions of learning strategies for the four language skills. Each skill consists of 20 questions and in each skill consists of three groups of learning strategies, namely; cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, and social strategies. For the speaking category, the statements of the number 1-10 are grouped into cognitive learning strategies, the statements of the number 11-15 are included in the meta-cognitive learning strategies, and the statements of the number 16-20 are included in the social learning strategies. For the category of listening and reading learning strategies, cognitive strategies are grouped into the statements of the numbers 1-11, meta-cognitive strategies are grouped into the statements of the numbers 12-17 and social strategies are grouped into the statements of the no. 18-20. Then, for learning strategies in writing, cognitive learning strategies are measured with the statements of the number 1-13, meta-cognitive strategies in the statements of the number 14-17 and social strategies with the statements of the no. 18-20. So, overall there are 80 statements for the four skills. Questionnaire data were collected by distributing questionnaires to all students of the study site through using the Google.doc form. After being filled in by participants, there were 129 participants who filled out and submitted questionnaires. The

questionnaire was analyzed statistically by looking for the frequency of each statement for each learning strategy, namely cognitive strategy, meta-cognitive strategy, and social strategy.

### *Ethical considerations*

To deal with the ethics of research, particularly, to keep our participants' identities and study site, we masked the names of the participants and research site. Also, participation in this study was totally voluntary and participants were allowed to resign anytime they wanted. All participants were given an informed consent form.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this current study was to examine the learning strategies of English as foreign language students in one state university in Jambi Province. We divided our findings into four sub-headings, namely (1) the language learning strategies in speaking skill, (2) the language learning strategies in listening skill, (3) the language learning strategies in reading skill, (4) the language learning strategies in writing skill.

#### *Language learning strategies in speaking skill*

Cognitive strategy, table 1 shows the three highest percentages of statements about learning strategies in the terms of cognitive strategies, especially for *speaking skill*, the statement, "I try to remember new English words by pronouncing them" was a strategy that was always used by students (27%), and also most often was 49%. Sometimes students (50%) also used the statement, "I use rhymes to remember new English words" strategy. Meanwhile, the learning strategy that was most rarely used by students was "I tape the sentences I produce" which was 42%.

**Table 1.** *Percentage of language learning strategies for speaking skills for cognitive strategies*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I use rhymes to remember new English word	Never	12	9
	Rarely	30	23
	Sometimes	65	50
	Often	19	15
	Always	3	2
I try to remember new English word by pronouncing them	Never	0	-
	Rarely	2	2
	Sometimes	29	22
	Often	63	49
	Always	35	27
I try to remember new English word by pronouncing them	Never	19	15
	Rarely	54	42
	Sometimes	43	33
	Often	12	9
	Always	1	1

Metacognitive strategies are all learners' behaviors related to the tactics or ways of learners to deal with and manage teaching and learning materials. For this strategy, especially in *speaking skill*, 45% of EFL students always used "I try to speak with myself to improve my speaking" strategy. In other words they always practiced using English by speaking to themselves. With the same percentage of 45% of students often used the strategy "I notice my English mistakes, and use that information to help me do better". It means that they learned from mistakes. For detailed percentage results for each statement in table 2 below:

**Table 2.** Percentage of language learning strategies for speaking skills for meta-cognitive strategies

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I try to correct my mistakes that I produce orally	Never	0	-
	Rarely	2	2
	Sometimes	34	26
	Often	62	48
	Always	31	24
I try to speak with myself to improve my speaking	Never	0	-
	Rarely	9	7
	Sometimes	21	16
	Often	41	32
	Always	58	45
I notice my English mistakes, and use that information to help me do better	Never	2	1
	Rarely	3	2
	Sometimes	30	23
	Often	58	45
	Always	36	28
I prepare a topic or grammatical rules in speaking practice	Never	2	2
	Rarely	17	13
	Sometimes	59	45
	Often	37	29
	Always	14	11

All students' behaviors related to student work with peers in achieving learning goals are social strategies. There were five statements in this strategy. The highest percentage of choices often used by students (26%) for speaking skill was the statement of "I ask somebody to correct me when I talk" strategy. Namely they asked for help from others to correct the mistakes that they said. Then, overall, for the total choice always, often, and sometimes, the strategy with the highest percentage was "I ask questions in English." They asked in English as much as 89%. See table 3 for the detailed results:

**Table 3.** *Percentage of language learning strategies for speaking skills for social strategies*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I ask somebody to correct me when I talk	Never	4	3
	Rarely	19	15
	Sometimes	32	25
	Often	40	31
	Always	34	26
I ask questions in English	Never	1	1
	Rarely	14	11
	Sometimes	75	58
	Often	38	29
	Always	2	2
If I can not think during a conversation in English, I use gestures	Never	5	4
	Rarely	20	16
	Sometimes	41	32
	Often	48	37
	Always	15	12

***Language learning strategies in listening skill***

Cognitive strategy, for listening skill, especially for cognitive strategies in learning English, of the eleven strategies, the one that was always and often used by participants (87%) was that they learned by listening to English songs. Sometimes they learnt to listen in English by guessing what the speaker said from the materials that they were listening to (57%). The percentage of details for each listening learning strategy is in the following table.

**Table 4.** *Percentage of listening skills learning strategies for cognitive strategy*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I try to guess what somebody is saying by using grammatical rules.	Never	3	2
	Rarely	27	21
	Sometimes	73	57
	Often	18	14
	Always	8	6
I learn English by listening to English song or other listening scripts.	Never	1	1
	Rarely	2	2
	Sometimes	14	11
	Often	54	42
	Always	58	45
I concentrate on the grammar rather than on the communication.	Never	7	5
	Rarely	49	38
	Sometimes	58	45
	Often	13	10
	Always	2	2

For meta-cognitive strategies in listening skill, the highest percentage (95%) used was the statement, " *After a listening practice, I check and recheck my understanding.*" Almost all participants double-checked their understanding of the materials that they were listening to while 21% of participants rarely and never even prepared themselves as presented in the following table.

**Table 5.** *Percentage of listening skills learning strategies for meta-cognitive strategies*

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Choices</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
I listen to what I say to practice my listening skill	Never	3	2
	Rarely	23	18
	Sometimes	58	45
	Often	35	27
	Always	10	8
Before practicing my listening skill, I prepare a topic, pronunciation or grammatical rules which give me the greatest trouble.	Never	4	3
	Rarely	23	18
	Sometimes	60	47
	Often	30	23
	Always	12	9
After a listening practice, I check and recheck my understanding.	Never	1	1
	Rarely	5	4
	Sometimes	32	25
	Often	65	50
	Always	26	20
I correct the mistakes that I produce orally.	Never	1	1
	Rarely	11	9
	Sometimes	42	33
	Often	48	37
	Always	27	21
I try to be aware of which sound give the greatest trouble. In this way I can pay special attention to them while I listen and practice.	Never	0	-
	Rarely	13	10
	Sometimes	56	43
	Often	46	36
	Always	14	11

From the results of data analysis, it was found that almost all students (98%) stated that using listening strategy by listening to other people's speaking in English was the way they used "mostly." Only 2% of participants did not use this strategy as presented in the following table.



**Table 6.** *Percentage of listening skills learning strategies for social strategy*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
If I cannot understand what somebody is saying, I ask him/her to slow down or say it again	Never	1	1
	Rarely	4	3
	Sometimes	37	29
	Often	54	42
	Always	33	26
Listening to what somebody is saying improves my listening skill	Never	1	1
	Rarely	1	1
	Sometimes	28	22
	Often	51	40
	Always	48	37
In a group discussion, my listening skill is improved	Never	0	-
	Rarely	15	12
	Sometimes	46	36
	Often	46	36
	Always	22	17

### *Language learning strategies in reading skill*

For the cognitive strategy, there were two strategies that were not used by most students, especially in learning *reading skills*. The highest percentage was that 40% of participants almost never and never read the text in a loud voice (*I read the passage aloud*) which was followed by 36% of participants never translated words to understand the text being read (*I try to translate words for word*). However, there were two strategies in understanding texts in *reading skills* that obtained the same percentage where almost all participants (98%) chose the strategy "*I try to understand the passage by using my general knowledge and experience*" and "*I use the key words to understand the whole ideas*" as presented in the following table.

**Table 7.** *Percentage of learning skills for reading skills cognitive strategy*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I try to translate word for word	Never	8	6
	Rarely	39	30
	Sometimes	41	32
	Often	24	19
	Always	17	13
I try to understand the passage by using my general knowledge and experience	Never	0	-
	Rarely	2	2
	Sometimes	52	40
	Often	59	46
	Always	16	12

**Table 7.** *Continued...*

I use the key words to understand the whole ideas	Never	0	-
	Rarely	2	2
	Sometimes	35	27
	Often	56	43
	Always	36	28
I read the passage aloud	Never	14	11
	Rarely	37	29
	Sometimes	56	43
	Often	19	15
	Always	3	2
I read a text more for ideas than words	Never	14	11
	Rarely	37	29
	Sometimes	56	43
	Often	19	15
	Always	3	2

For the meta-cognitive strategy, there were 4 statements starting from number 12 to 15. Of the four statements, statement number 12 had the highest percentage (98%) (a combination of *sometimes*, *often*, and *always*) such as "I correct my mistakes by rereading the text." The majority of students corrected their mistakes in understanding English-language text by re-reading the text given by the lecturers. In addition, the second strategy was the most commonly used by students (96%) was "If I cannot understand a reading passage, I try to analyze what difficulty I actually have". They re-analyzed what difficulties they faced in understanding the texts given by the lecturers.

**Table 8.** *Percentage of reading skills learning strategies for meta-cognitive strategies*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I correct my mistakes by rereading the text	Never	0	-
	Rarely	3	2
	Sometimes	40	31
	Often	57	44
	Always	29	22
If I cannot understand a reading passage, I try to analyze what difficulty I actually have	Never	0	-
	Rarely	5	4
	Sometimes	42	33
	Often	50	39
	Always	32	25
I try to be aware of which words or grammar rules give me the greatest trouble. In this way I can pay special attention to them while I read and practice	Never	1	1
	Rarely	14	11
	Sometimes	62	48
	Often	37	29
	Always	15	12

For the social strategies, three strategies were used by participants for the reading skills. From the results of data analysis, 90% of the participants used the strategy by asking for help from their friends or lecturers if there was something that they did not understand from the reading that they read. Then, 84% of them discussed their reading materials with their friends. The last strategy that they used was that they read English messages sent by their friends. This strategy only gained 62%.

**Table 9.** *Percentage of learning skills for reading skills social strategy*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I discuss reading passages with my friends	Never	1	1
	Rarely	19	15
	Sometimes	61	47
	Often	33	26
	Always	15	12
If I do not understand the content of a reading passage, I ask my friends or my teachers for help	Never	0	-
	Rarely	13	10
	Sometimes	35	27
	Often	53	41
	Always	28	22
I improve my reading skill by reading letters from my friends	Never	14	11
	Rarely	35	27
	Sometimes	49	38
	Often	21	16
	Always	10	8

### *Language learning strategies in writing skills*

For the cognitive strategy in writing skills, out of thirteen (13) cognitive strategies, the strategy mostly used by students (98%) was by writing down whatever on their minds (*I write what I am thinking about*). Meanwhile, more than half of participants (58%) almost never and never used the strategy "*I keep a diary*". It showed that the use of writing diary had been replaced by making a statement on social media because commonly the students generally used social media instead of diary, but not by using English.

**Table 10.** *Percentage of writing skills learning strategies for cognitive strategy*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
If I do not know how to express my ideas in English while writing, I keep writing using certain rules that I know.	Never	0	-
	Rarely	6	5
	Sometimes	47	36
	Often	57	44
	Always	19	15

**Table 10.** *Continued...*

I write what I am thinking about	Never	0	-
	Rarely	3	2
	Sometimes	35	27
	Often	53	41
	Always	38	29
I consult a dictionary to find out the meanings of words.	Never	0	-
	Rarely	7	5
	Sometimes	36	28
	Often	44	34
	Always	42	33
I write out new material over and over.	Never	2	2
	Rarely	21	16
	Sometimes	67	52
	Often	30	23
	Always	9	7

There were two strategies used by students in writing skills, especially in learning English, which got the highest percentage of 95% each. The strategy was "I choose a topic to improve my writing skills" and "I read my writing and correct the mistakes." The next strategy was "I try to be aware of which words or grammar rules give the greatest trouble, this way I can pay special attention to them while I write and practice" as much as 94% and the last strategy was "I rewrite my composition by correcting the mistakes that I notice" with 92% of participants used it.

**Table 11.** *Percentage of writing skills learning strategies for meta-cognitive strategies*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I choose a topic to improve my writing skill	Never	0	-
	Rarely	7	5
	Sometimes	59	46
	Often	49	38
	Always	14	11
I read my writing and correct the mistakes	Never	0	-
	Rarely	6	5
	Sometimes	27	21
	Often	61	47
	Always	35	27

For writing strategies in terms of the social strategy, there was one strategy that got the highest percentage with more than half of the participants (52%) writing letters to their friends using English. However, almost all participants (91%) chose a strategy of asking friends or lecturers

to correct their writing, followed by 82% of participants sent messages either by SMS or WA application using English to their friends. This showed that students rarely used letters in communication.

**Table 12.** *Percentage of writing skills learning strategies for social strategy*

Statements	Choices	Participants	Percentage (%)
I write a message to my friends in English for practice.	Never	6	5
	Rarely	17	13
	Sometimes	62	48
	Often	33	26
	Always	11	9
I write letters in English to my friends.	Never	30	23
	Rarely	37	29
	Sometimes	37	29
	Often	20	16
	Always	5	4
I ask my friends or my teachers to correct my writing.	Never	3	2
	Rarely	8	6
	Sometimes	45	35
	Often	45	35
	Always	28	22

## Discussion

The purpose of this current study was to examine the learning strategies of English as foreign language students in one state university in Jambi Province, particularly (1) what types of language learning strategies do English as foreign language students use? (2) how is the language learning strategy choice of English as foreign language students in learning English as a foreign language in their university? Based on the findings of the questionnaire results regarding student language learning strategies in learning English as a foreign language, there were several things that we interpreted based on the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). First, for speaking skill, the strategy mostly used in cognitive strategies by students was to pronounce the new vocabulary they got so they could remind the word. While for the meta-cognitive strategies, participants immediately corrected the words they said when they realized if what they said was wrong. Finally, for the social strategy, in speaking skills, students asked more questions in English. The findings of this study indicated that participants used the strategies that worked for them as Tuncer (2009) claimed that learners had a benefit such as utilizing cognitive and metacognitive skills while learning a language while the findings of Mukminin's et al. (2018) study indicated that social strategies were among the least preferred strategies used in learning a foreign language.

Second, in listening skills, almost all participants used songs and other English-language materials that they listened to improve their listening skills in cognitive domains which are in line with the findings of Mukminin's et al. (2018) study showed that cognitive strategies were among the most preferred strategies in learning a foreign language. Then, for the meta-cognitive domains, they used the strategy by re-examining the assignments given by the lecturers. They did this to find out their understanding of what they heard. Meanwhile, for the social strategy, they listened to someone else to speak that could improve their listening skills. Third, for reading skills, there were two learning strategies with the same percentage, namely 98 percent used by students in improving their understanding of the reading materials provided by lecturers for the cognitive domain. The first learning strategy was to understand the texts provided by using the experience and knowledge they had before. The second was using keywords to understand the overall ideas of the reading given. Then, for learning strategies in the meta-cognitive domain, students used the method of repeating the reading materials given to correct the mistakes they made. Finally, for learning strategies in the social strategy domains, students usually asked for help from friends or lecturers if they did not understand the materials provided by the lecturers. Fourth, the writing skills, the strategy that was mostly used by students in the realm of cognitive strategies in improving their writing skills, especially using English was by writing whatever was in their minds by pouring into written forms. For the meta-cognitive strategies, most students used how to choose the topics they wanted and read while correcting mistakes made specifically on the grammatical side and vocabulary selection got the most percentage at 95%. Meanwhile, for the social strategies, students asked for help from friends or lecturers to correct their writing. Concerning the social strategies, Oxford (1990) explicated that the school arrangement might disappoint social strategies such as cooperating with other students because of competitive accomplishments that boost individual accomplishment. However, the findings of this current study showed participants helped each other in learning English by asking help from their friends if they got difficulties in specific language skills, for example, in writing and reading skills.

### Conclusion and Implications

Based the results obtained, it can be concluded that for *speaking skills*, *reading skills* and *writing strategies*, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies were most often used by students. Then for listening skills, cognitive strategies and social strategies were most often used by students. This study provides a classification of foreign language learning strategies consisting of three categories namely cognitive, meta-cognitive, and social strategies. This classification is actually not final, it still needs further studies to enrich the findings related to foreign language learning strategies so that findings will be obtained more consistently and can be used in any community. This study is also very important to be conducted for learners at any levels. In addition, lecturers also need to be given training on their language teaching strategies so that they will be more familiar with effective learning strategies for students to use.

### Disclosure statement

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