Language Learning Strategies Used by Students Preparing for IELTS Examination

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Abstract
This study investigates the type of language learning strategies (LLS) used by a group of students preparing for the IELTS examination. The main intention is to see if there is a certain pattern of LLS used by students of different IELTS bands. There are altogether 9 bands of IELTS scores (Band 1 – for non-user to the highest band – Band 9 – expert user) and this research seeks to know if there is a standard pattern of LLS used by students of different IELTS bands. Previous studies have shown a difference in preference on gender for different sets of LLS and thus, this study also analyses this variable. Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning was administered to a group of students preparing for IELTS examination. Findings suggest that respondents preferred social strategies as their main LLS with females being the more active users of LLS. Results show a relationship between students SILL and IELTS score, thus the null hypothesis tested was rejected. The outcome of the study is aimed at equipping future students preparing for IELTS examination with appropriate LLS that can be utilised to improve their language, and consequently a higher IELTS band score.

Key words: IELTS, language learning strategies

INTRODUCTION
The learning process today has changed. At one time, learning mainly depended on the teacher, but now, it has gradually shifted to the learners. In the domain of second language learning, Jacobs and Farrell (2001) touch on the importance of learners taking their own responsibility in learning and that a form of democratisation takes place with the students taking on more rights and responsibilities. They further explain that eventually, students will be able to determine the best possible strategies to be used, develop new strategies or refine present ones so as to be better learners. Prominent language researchers, Oxford (1990) and Bremmer (1998) suggest that learners utilising certain types of language learning strategies (LLS) often emerged as better language learners.

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STUDY BACKGROUND
In the Malaysian context of education, at tertiary or pre-university levels, students have the choice to further their studies either locally or abroad. Students who prefer to study abroad are generally required to sit for a university entrance test which tests their level of English competency and one common test used is the Cambridge’s International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Studying in foreign countries may pose at least two learning challenges: mastering the language and mastering the programme of study. Once the first hurdle is overcome, the second one could be easier to handle. It is not uncommon for students to fail to qualify for foreign university entrance because they were unable to meet the minimum requirements either from the language or programme aspect of the study or both.

There are two centres, British Council and IDP Australia, which offer preparatory classes for students taking the IELTS examination. Private universities and colleges are also known to offer such classes. Apart from being familiar with the examination format, students also learn English language components with the intention of improving their English language level. Weaker learners are often identified and personalised learning is given to accommodate the areas that they lack, perhaps in grammar, writing or speaking. Usually, it is easier for students who are good in English to achieve high IELTS Band. Previous research done by Bialystok (1981) and O’Malley et al. (1985) noted that good language learners do possess good LLS.

Thus, this led to an interest in finding out the type of LLS that are utilised by a batch of students preparing for the IELTS examination, the influence of gender, the LLS used and other variables related to Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and IELTS score. In addition, this study also attempts to identify a pattern of strategies (if any) specifically in relation to students in certain IELTS band groupings. The hope is that the knowledge gained will enlighten teachers and instructors of IELTS on certain aspects of LLS that would benefit learners to do well in the IELTS examination, specifically the weaker learners.

IELTS—A UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE TEST
IELTS is one of the many examinations that test the level of English of students whose intention is to study in an English speaking country either at undergraduate or postgraduate levels. For this criterion, candidates are required to sit for the academic version of IELTS. IELTS is owned by three partners: the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, the British Council and IDP; Education Australia (Cambridge IELTS 6, 2007). The examination is divided into two components: oral and written and is made up of four sections: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking.

Results are presented in a nine-band score, from Band 1 – defined as non-user to the highest one of Band 9 which is described as an expert user of English. Overall score can also be reported in either a full band score (Band 6) and a half band score (Band 6.5). The
basic requirement of university entrance is an overall of Band 6.5 at which users are described as competent users, one who generally has effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. He can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations (Terry & Wilson 2005). Results obtained are guaranteed to reflect candidates’ real ability to communicate in English in a way that is relevant to the real world (www.britishcouncil.org). Many universities worldwide accept IELTS score as a standard measurement of student’s level of English competency.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS
The focus of this study is to investigate the following areas:
1. What is the main type of LLS employed by the students?
2. (i) What are the types of LLS commonly used or preferred by students of different gender?
   (ii) Which gender is the more active user of LLS?
3. (i) What is the relationship between the students’ overall SILL score and IELTS score?
   (ii) What is the pattern of type/s of LLS used by students of different IELTS Bands?

Based on research question 3 (i), this study is aimed at testing the following hypothesis:
H0: There is no significant relationship between the students’ overall SILL score and IELTS score.

METHODOLOGY
Research Method
The research employs a quantitative approach, using the survey method involving the use of a questionnaire to collect data

Instrumentation
Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire was used to seek answers to the questions of this study. There are several version of SILL but this study employs SILL Version 7.0 as it caters for students learning English either as a second or foreign language. SILL contains fifty Likert-scale statements related to learning English. Respondents are to rate themselves according to the rating given: 1 - Never or almost never true of me, 2 – Usually not true of me, 3 – Somewhat true of me, 4 – Usually true of me and 5 – Always or almost always true of me.

The fifty statements are sub-divided into six parts with nine statements in memory strategies, fourteen in cognitive strategies, six in compensation strategies, nine in metacognitive domain, and six each in affective and social strategies. SILL does not specify learners as good or poor learners but it measures the frequency of students
Table 1. Description of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Scores</th>
<th>Description of scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>4.5 to 5.0</td>
<td>Always or almost always used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.5 to 4.4</td>
<td>Generally used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>2.5 to 3.4</td>
<td>Sometimes used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1.5 to 2.4</td>
<td>Generally not used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.0 to 1.4</td>
<td>Never or almost never used</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

applying certain LLS in learning English. Scores of SILL are divided into three categories of high, medium and low users of LLS.

Sample and Population
The subjects of this study were 72 students of Cambridge A-Level (CAL) (54 students) and Canadian Pre-University (CPU) (18 students) who were enrolled in either weekly classes or Saturday IELTS workshop. Twenty-four females and 48 males made up this sample. These students were either bursary or scholarship recipients from Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia (KPM) (56 students), Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA)(10 students) and PETRONAS (6 students). Generally, these students were Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) holders and had obtained a grade of A+, A or A- for the English subject. Upon completion of the present study programme successfully, these students are expected to complete a four-year study abroad or in certain cases, private universities locally. Abroad or local, the sponsorship bodies have made it compulsory for them to enrol in IELTS workshops and subsequently IELTS examination with the target of achieving a minimum requirement of Band 6.5.

Procedures
SILL was distributed to the subjects during the early weeks of the class period to ensure the involvement of all the students in the class. A briefing on the focus of study and SILL was given prior to data collection stage. Students were also shown the method of score calculation. Indirectly, students were aware of their SILL score and category.

Additionally, students were required to provide this background information: gender, SPM English grade and date of IELTS examination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The results and discussions will be presented based on the research questions.

Question One
- What is the main type of LLS employed by the students?
Table 2. Types of language learning strategies employed by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Mean score</th>
<th>Rank of use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Memory strategies (remembering more effectively)</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Cognitive strategies (using your mental process)</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Compensation strategies (compensating for missing knowledge)</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Metacognitive strategies (organising and evaluating your learning)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Affective strategies (managing your emotions)</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Social strategies (learning with others)</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A mean score of 3.92, the highest, was obtained for social studies strategies, making it the main type of LLS used among this batch. The mean score described respondents in the category of students who generally used LLS. Apart from being described as high users of social strategies, they are also categorised as high users of cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies. The students’ usage of memory and affective strategies puts them in the medium group which defines them as ‘sometimes’ users of these LLS.

Oxford (1990) describes social strategies as the catalyst to increased interaction with the target language. Three main strategies that come under this category are asking questions, cooperating and empathising with others.

The combination of these three strategies is helpful for learners to master communication skills. By speaking the language, learners are provided with an opportunity to test their knowledge of the language, ask for correction and be corrected. Also, it indicates the students’ ability to cooperate with proficient users and develop a cultural understanding by communicating with native speakers. Students in the CPU programme had the privilege of communicating with native speakers within their learning environment as 80% of academics teaching the CPU programme are Canadian qualified teachers, holding Canadian citizenships.

As observed in the class, these batches of students could be described as active learners, often displaying active participation in class activities, group discussions and presentation. It was often not needed to initiate one to lead a discussion or begin class presentation as they were often ready to take charge in activities or task assigned. It could be concluded that active participation was the proof that they generally preferred social strategies as the main strategy in learning English.

**Question Two**

a. What are the types of LLS commonly used or preferred by male or female students?
Based on the results, female students tend to prefer part C, the compensation strategies, of SILL with a mean of 4.08 which categorises them as high users of LLS. On the other hand, the score for the male counterpart reflected the results of the overall preferred type of LLS which was social strategies (Part F). The obtained mean was 3.86, also in the group of high LLS users.

The preference of female students to choose compensation strategies as their main LLS was similar to the choice of female learners in Chang et al. (2007). Guessing the meaning of words and using gestures were two compensation strategies learners might use to accommodate their language limitation. The outcome of males preferring social strategies was the opposite of the results obtained in studies by Green & Oxford (1995) and Embi (2000) but it should be noted that the finding of a difference in preference for LLS among the male and female students is not a conclusive one.

b. Which gender is the more active user of LLS?

Overall, the female gender were the more active users of LLS with the mean average being in the high user LLS domain (mean score: 3.8) with the male respondents being categorised as medium users of LLS with a mean score of 3.39. This outcome was similar to the results obtained by Chang et al. (2007) and Hong-Nam et al. (2006) in which female students were reported to obtain a slightly higher mean than the male students. In other studies, similar results were also obtained by Sabuncuoglu (2013) who reports that female respondents are the more active users of LLS. Sabuncuoglu further notes that females are better learners than males which coincides with the scientific explanation of a greater activity in brain areas related to language encoding (Swaminathan, 2008).

**Table 3. Gender preference and language learning strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender / Type of LLS</th>
<th>Female Type of LLS</th>
<th>Male Type of LLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Min Score</td>
<td>4.08 (C) Compensation Strategies</td>
<td>3.86 (F) Social Strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question Three**

a. What is the relationship between the students’ overall SILL score and IELTS score?

H₀ = There is no significant relationship between the students’ overall SILL score and IELTS Band score.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to measure the relationship between the students’ overall SILL score and IELTS score. Results showed a positive correlation between the two variables (r = 0.633). Overall, there was a strong significant relationship between students’ overall SILL score and their IELTS Band score signaling that students who obtained higher SILL score were also achieving higher IELTS
Band score. Furthermore, as p=0.030 obtained was lower than the 0.05 significant level, the null hypothesis was rejected indicating the strength of connection between students’ LLS used and their capacity to achieve higher IELTS Band than the minimum requirement.

b. What is the pattern of type/s of LLS used by students of different IELTS Bands?

A total of 72 students were selected for this study; Table 4 summarises the three groups that the students were grouped based on their IELTS Band score:

- Band 6.5
- Band 7 and Band 7.5
- Band 8 and Band 8.5

An overall IELTS Band score can be reported as half band score but for the purpose of this analysis, the whole and half band will be grouped together as learners in these two categories are described as having the same characteristics. The lowest Band score for this group was Band 6.5 with the highest being Band 8.5. The overall Band 6.5 is regarded as the minimum requirement score for university entrance. All the students involved in this study were able to score the minimum requirement or higher to be eligible for entry into universities.

A frequency distribution table was created to observe if there existed any specific patterns of LLS used by students in different IELTS Band. Data were grouped based on the ranking of mean score for each type of LLS – Part A (Memory Strategies) to Part F (Social Strategies). The aim was to see if all or the majority of the students in different IELTS Band score groupings utilised the same type or types of LLS.

The data obtained from the 12 respondents scoring Band 6.5 showed a high frequency of usage in two parts of SILL which were cognitive and compensation strategies. Both strategies are direct strategies. Oxford (1990) generally categorises cognitive strategies as the most popular strategies with language learners. This finding reveals that these learners were comfortable with skills like skimming and scanning related to reading activities and practising the language, both spoken and written, using certain patterns. Meanwhile, the choice of compensation strategies might reflect their insufficient knowledge of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IELTS Band</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BAND 6.5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAND 7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAND 7.5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAND 8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAND 8.5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. IELTS band score and usage patterns of language learning strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IELTS Band</th>
<th>Preference of Type of Language Learning Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 6.5 (N=12)</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 7 &amp; Band 7.5 (N=36)</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 8 &amp; Band 8.5 (N=24)</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

English language that they made do with guessing or predicting to help them understand certain lessons. In the other sets of SILL, students’ choices were more or less equally divided with the percentage obtained showing each of the components being ranked at different ranks.

Students in Band 7 and Band 7.5 main preference in the type of LLS fell in metacognitive categories which Oxford (1990) lists as indirect strategies. This type of LLS basically describes learners as active planners of their learning who are able to plan their own learning in setting the focus, arranging, planning and also being able to evaluate their own progress. These are vital criteria to be successful language learners. It is however difficult to track a pattern in the other five components of SILL as the respondents’ ranking choices were more mixed.

A distinct preference for social strategies is strong among students in Band 8 and Band 8.5 as 83% of 24 students who achieved this grade chose this type of LLS as their first choice. Also it should be noted that the remaining 4 learners ranked this type of LLS in the second rank. Despite the different ranks, the frequency percentage obtained showed that the pattern of LLS choice inclined towards social strategies. This group of strategies defines users as main users of indirect strategies where they link their act of learning the language with other students or people. These learners could be described as active learners as they preferred an interactive mode of learning. They were aware of their own learning as seeking verification and clarification to their limitations in the target language.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The main objective of this paper was to seek the type or types of LLS used by the students enrolled in the IELTS class in order to establish if there was a pattern among
students towards certain type or types of LLS as per their scores in IELTS. Results suggest that the overall main preference of LLS was social strategies which was also the choice of the male respondents of this task. Female students in this study preferred compensation strategies more than the other types of LLS. Compared to males, a higher mean score was obtained for female students, thus showing them as the more active users of LLS. This finding indicates that male and female students take a diverse approach to learning. A significant relationship was correspondingly obtained between students’ SILL score and IELTS Band score, leading to a conclusion of a positive relationship between students who use multiple LLS and their possible ability to score positive results in a language class context.

The attempt to see if there existed a standard pattern of LLS use among students of the same IELTS Band showed a mixed pattern. It was only among students of Band 8 and above that a pattern could be seen with more than 75% of candidates acknowledging social strategies as their main preference.

Future studies involving more participants could be conducted to see if the results of this study can be replicated or instead new findings could be generated and learned. To find a conclusive outcome is perhaps not possible and should not be encouraged as each learner is unique and the uniqueness should be appreciated. However, the knowledge and evidence gathered could be helpful and enriching for teachers, trainers and facilitators of ESL or IELTS class in helping learners to be better language learners.

REFERENCES


