Successful Learners’ Learning Strategies At The English Department

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Abstract: This research was intended to find out learners’ learning strategies at the English Department of STKIP PGRI Blitar. The case study method was used to conduct the research about particular learners. Subjects were selected according to their score (GPA). Data were collected through note taking and interviewing. The researcher selected, simplified and organized the raw data which refer to the research problem being investigated, then data were displayed carefully. Findings show that successful learners employ different learning strategies. The basic key of success that can be drawn is that the more strategies the learners employ the more open the possibilities for success become.

Key Words: language learning strategies, successful learner

It is important for students to understand the importance of using language learning strategies in the process of language learning. Hence, teachers should deliver this message to their students. According to Chang, et al. (2007) based on the results of their study, in general, according to the rank order of the frequency of use, the most frequently used strategy by the students was compensation strategies and followed by memory strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, social strategies, cognitive strategies and affective strategies. Some students showed that they do not really use these strategies for their English learning even though they know the strategies are available. But some students reported that they even did not know there are strategies for language learning. Consequently, teachers should help students cultivate and raise their awareness of language learning strategies. Once students are aware of advantages of using strategies in their language learning process, they will be willing to and appropriately employ these strategies to facilitate their English learning.

In his finding, Pezhman (2012) has concluded that the employment of language learning strategies facilitate and improve language learning and assist language learners in different ways. It has been found that successful language learners have reported to use more and wider range of learning strategies than less successful students. The findings revealed that advanced language learners have reported to employ learning strategies more frequently than beginner learners.

In addition, language instructors should take their students’ learning strategies into considerations and try to recognize and identify students’ learning strategies in order to support less successful students to achieve success and master the target language.

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In addition, language instructors should take their students’ learning strategies into considerations and try to recognize and identify students’ learning strategies in order to support less successful students to achieve success and master the target language.
Teachers can identify these strategies through observations, language diaries, questionnaires, interviews and so on. By doing so, teachers will be able to assist language learners to recognize and appreciate the power of language learning strategies in the process of second or foreign language learning. Through learning strategies, teachers can also help the students to maintain their motivation, autonomy, and confidence and keep on going and try to accomplish the goal of learning the target language (Pezhman, 2012).

Yanto (2011) conducted a study in Australia. The data from the study were taken from interviews with five Indonesian students who were studying in Australia. Three of the participants were female students while the two others were male. Four of them were studying at Flinders University while one of them was studying at Australian National University, Canberra. All of them were taking Master’s Degree programs. They were considered as good language learners because they could get scholarship to study in Australia. To get the scholarship, they had been selected from among over 5000 students in Indonesia who were interested in the scholarship. The selection was focused on communicative skill. At the time of the interviews, they had been studying in Australia for five months. The participants were asked to comment on some questions about various aspects of English language learning. For example, how they prefer to learn English, what media they used in learning English. They were also asked about their attitudes toward their mistakes in learning English.

In this study Yanto (2011) said that, the findings help us understand the strategies used most by good Indonesian learners in learning English. Like what other researchers found, this study has figured out the pattern of language strategies used by good Indonesian learners in learning English as a foreign language. This study also shows us the factors that influence the participants in using the strategies. In summary, the interviews have provided the following findings: The participants find their own way, taking charge of their learning by taking English courses outside the school. The participants are creative learners by using various media in learning English. They make errors work for them and not against them by keeping practicing English to improve their ability. Motivation, environment and attitudes toward errors are very influential factors in using strategies of language learning.

The studies on defining the good language learner provide a basis for the understanding of what good language learners do in order to learn a second language. Finding and clarifying the strategies of successful language learners helps the teachers and researchers to teach these strategies to less successful learners. The problem is to decide about a learner who has only learned one or two of these skills. Speed of acquisition, learner’s previous exposure to English, learner’s goal, and student’s level of proficiency should be taken into account in determining the good language learner. However, understanding and knowing of the characteristics, techniques, and strategies of a good language learner facilitate students’ language learning and help them enhance learning efficiency. In addition, with this knowledge and awareness, students’ language learning can be improved through learner training by their instructors (Sewell, 2003).

Learning a language well depends on so many different factors, and there is considerable variation among learners. Some learners may be more successful due to factors out of their control, like gender, intelligence, age, etc. Successful language learners appear to use a wider range of strategies in a larger number of situations than weaker learners. Some learners may not be aware of which strategies they use or which strategies are available to them. The teacher can therefore help these learners to recognize the power of using strategies by integrating learner-strategy training into the regular lesson, teaching them how to evaluate each strategy, and how and why to use them. It is important though that the individual language tasks, and the characteristics of each learner, are taken into account when doing such training. Some learners may be resistant to change, and the teacher will need to be creative to find ways to disguise the new strategies as old ones (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

Cahyani (2010) found that the successful language learners tend to be independent and autonomous in doing self study (by reading textbooks or English articles, listening to western songs, listening to news program, and watching talk show program or western movies, translating papers and song lyrics), and seeking the opportunity to practice independently (by joining English conversation club, debate club, interactive radio program using English; speaking and making contact with native speakers and English teachers; being an English debate coach). The language learners above always try to get language exposures from any sources. When someone is exposed to the language, he can get inputs to be internalized. Thus, it is nonsense when somebody can produce the language without knowing words or phrases in the language he is producing.
Cahyani added that successful language learners are overall, well-motivated and self-initiating, taking responsibility for their learning, and creating their own learning opportunities. From the profile, we can learn that what they do outside classroom have greater portion in improving their language competence. It is important to note that they actively involve in the classroom activities and do some other activities outside the class which are related to their interest and hobbies. Their reason is basically that they love and enjoy doing such activities. In short, the English learners did a lot independent learning which suits their interest. They use direct and indirect learning strategies although they seemed not to realize it before. They, however, believe that those strategies are helpful for boosting and maintaining their language. From the six learning strategies employed by the learners: memorizing strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy, it seems that those belonging to direct strategies are all used since the strategies help students directly.

Good effective learners according to Alves (2008) enjoy encountering the language outside the classroom in different circumstances and contexts. They will try to understand a film without reading the subtitles and consequently ask what certain expressions mean. They try to decipher and understand the lyrics of a song they like: they may try to read a book or even buy magazines in English and guess the meaning of unknown words from the context. Many of them are organized and use different techniques to order and classify information, such as separate notebooks for vocabulary or using different colors to highlight and separate information. However, despite the different characteristics and/or strategies, there is one aspect which is common to all that they enjoy learning English.

Alves (2008) added that there are many reasons that may account for learners’ success, many of which are clearly related to motivation and determination. Learning and teaching go hand in hand as the teacher facilitates and/or guides the learning process. It is essential for the teacher to be optimistic from the beginning in order to trigger responses from learners which may lead to better language learning. It is thus the opinion that learners may become better language learners when exposed to a variety of meaningful learning tasks and learning strategies that enhance their motivation, self-esteem and determination.

In summary, the previous studies that have produced the various types the complete picture of good or successful language learners encourage the present researcher to continue the investigation. The aim of the study is to reveal the strategies used by successful learners in English Department at STKIP PGRI Blitar in order to raise students’ awareness of language learning strategies and try to use them, showing what they thought and felt about their study and what they did to learn the language so successfully.

METHOD

As it is claimed by Bogdan & Biklen (1998:6) that qualitative research concerns with process, this study also attempts to trace the processes that have been carried out by the respondents of the study. Thus, this qualitative study is concerned with the process of employing the strategies in order to attain successful language learning. Therefore, in this study, the form of qualitative design that is selected to conduct the study is called qualitative case study. As cited by Thomas (2003:33) case study consists of an entity and the entity’s actions, so frequently it also offers explanation of why the entity acts as it does. This present case study focuses on the learner’s learning experience in carrying out learning strategies before finally they come up as successful language learners (with GPA above 3.65). So the case study is selected to approach the data not due to the number of the subjects involved but the actions of the learners when learning strategies selected become effective and leading them to success.

The first respondent (IR); She is 21 years old. She is the student of English department of STKIP Blitar to finish her 1st degree and her GPA is 3.72. She learns English in her daily activities such as listening to music, reading, watching movies, speaking and discussing current topics with her friends and lecturers especially in her academic society. She always spends her time to read some English books such as novel, short story, reading passages. She always tries to keep her English well by doing something, because practice is the best strategy to learn. She keeps in contact with some lecturers using English, sending short messages, making conversation, and tries her new vocabulary, new idioms to keep her English alive. She is highly motivated, she likes to join some competitions like speech contest and story telling.

The second respondent (TH); He was born on March 9th 1985 in Blitar. He took UMPTN and managed to attend Mechanical Engineering Subject in University of Udayana Bali. He has a step father aged to attend Mechanical Engineering Subject in University of Udayana Bali.
foreigners. It was his chance to learn more and practice his English. In 2008, he took an academic leave. In late 2009, he finished his study and went back home for keeping on his own business. In 2011, his mother asked him to attend STKIP PGRI Blitar in order to get another degree (S.Pd). She said she wanted him to be a teacher/lecturer. Then, he attended STKIP Blitar and now his GPA is 3.77.

He learns English in many ways such as listening to songs to try to comprehend the lyrics, watching movie (get idioms, slang words and vocabulary), reading some books. And in addition, he is a gamer in international game online, usually he meets people who speak English and he tries to make a conversation. He is a learner who has self confidence and highly motivated. He always tries to do everything possible to learn.

The third respondent (RM); He is 22 years old. He is The Leader of English Student Association in his college with GPA 3.66. He is good in social environment such as friendly to everyone, acceptable in the new environment, he can get new friends easily and he is a polite person. He has motto that Life is Choice. He is a student in STKIP Blitar while becoming Drum Band Trainer for many schools from Kindergarten till Junior High School for examples Perwanida Blitar Kindergarten, Ngadirejo Kindergarten, Senior High School 1 Selorejo that often wins in some Drum Band Competitions.

He likes teaching, sharing with people and he wants to be a lecturer in the future. He also likes reading, he tries to read books and learn from lecturers’ explanation for better comprehension in his listening skill. He has high self-confidence and is also highly motivated by means of doing everything possible to learn the language. When he learns something, he has to be someone who know better, being the first than others. He tries to approach his teacher/lecturer to have more references.

The fourth respondent (HB); He is 22 years old. Now he studies in STKIP PGRI Blitar at the English Department with GPA 3.81. He chooses English department because he wants to have good English and he thinks it can help him get better job. One of the most memorable experiences was when he won the competitions, he was the winner in English department’s event called EWA. He learns English by watching movies, reading books and playing online video games. By doing so, he learns many new vocabulary items, many sentences and look for the meaning. When he watches movie, he tries to turns off the subtitle and get better understanding for his listening skill. He chats in facebook and joins in English community on campus.

The fifth respondent (BR); She is 22 years old. She is an English student of STKIP PGRI Blitar and her GPA is 3.72. She started studying English when she was in Elementary School. She once studied English in BEC (Basic English Course) in Pare, Kediri or the so called “Kampung Inggris”. She studied there for 10 months before she entered STKIP Blitar.

Fieldnote and semi-structured interviews were triangulated for the collection of data. The field notes were meant to provide information which help to understand the students’ activities in “their strategies”. On the other hand, the researcher observed the performance of the particular respondent and take notes of the student’s activities in the classroom. During the classroom observation, the researcher used an instrument; this was field note. The field note was used in order to get complete and authentic description focusing on student’s activities.

Creswell (2007) states that recording procedures by using audio recorded in interview enables a person to take notes during the interview about the responses of the interviewee. It also helps a researcher organize thoughts on items such as headings, information about starting the interview, concluding ideas, information on ending the interview and thanking the respondent. All the information obtained through these instruments were compiled and analyzed in order to provide answers to the research questions.

A semi-structured interview by using audio recorded in English was conducted with each student to clarify and facilitate the interpretation of their activities. Two interview series were used for gathering the data. Therefore, two sets of interview guides were designed to help the execution of the interviews. The first interview study was aimed to gather general information about the subjects, from their personal details including their identity, learning belief, learning style and motivation to their general learning strategies and also establishes the context of the subjects’ experience. Thus, in this interview the whole language learning experiences starting from the past experience learning the language through the present when the proficiency has been settled were gathered. The second interview collect more specific information about learning strategies that were imposed along the process of learning and also allowed the subjects to reconstruct the details of their experience.
within the context in which it occurs. The context in this case was framed within the strategies that have been so far selected and employed by the respondent.

The research question of this article is what are the strategies employed by successful learners in learning English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study explored the experiences of students of STKIP PGRI Blitar in selecting and using the language learning strategies or LLS. Language learning strategies are learners’ behaviors, thoughts or actions (in order to facilitate their learning) which they use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable. The results presented the description of the themes that emerged from the analysis based on the data gathered from field notes and in-depth individual interviews.

The results of the study found that learners use a wide variety of Language learning strategies. All five participants reported using language learning strategies in their learning process. Strategies were used for problem solving, information processing in different language skills and linguistic skills and for target language practice. The study revealed that the selection of language learning strategy is individual to the learner and dependent upon the learner’s past experiences and current life context. Furthermore, this choice was conscious, dependent on the need to accommodate and advance their learning efforts.

Learning Strategy

Based on the results, it can be inferred that reviewing well can work effectively to help them storing new knowledge and keep it in their memory. Five respondents make use the strategy for reviewing well through reading material, in this case like passage. For instance IR, TH and RM, the inputs that they have encountered during their activity of reading are reviewed by repeatedly reading the same material several times for the purpose of better understanding. They also read a passage or material several times, taking notes, using the words in writing activities and applying the word in real life communications. The following statement by Brown (2000) will perfectly support my findings: learners prepare to study by previewing the next chapter in their unit, carefully reading the teacher’s comments on past work and reviewing their notes. Furthermore, the other respondents attempt to listen to the same songs every day and watching films in order to get the message as well as studying how the expressions are used properly.

It is also revealed that all respondents have employed several types of learning strategies within their learning process. Practicing, one of the set of this strategy is employed through both repeating and practicing naturalistically. This strategy requires learners to be able to expose what they have already stored in their mind by using it in authentic communications by practicing naturalistically, not only in a classroom but also outside the classroom. These include watching movies in English and listening to English songs many times and also try to imitate the models that provide an effective way to improve their listening comprehension as well as their speaking skills. Teachers/lecturers, classmates, chatting on Facebook, joining in English Community were also valuable sources of input to check and enhance their aural comprehension. As Rubin (1975:47) states, a good language learner practices. He may practice pronouncing words or making up sentences. He will seek out opportunities to use the language by looking for native speakers, going to the movies or to cultural events. He initiates conversations with the teacher or his fellow students in the target language. He is willing to repeat. He will usually take advantage of every opportunity to speak in class; indeed, in anyone class certain students seem to stand out and are called on more frequently.

Dealing with receiving and sending message, all the learners use this strategy in reading text and listening to audio materials. The first respondent reported that she uses this strategy in reading a passage while other respondents employ it in listening. She also uses dictionary to help her finding out the difficult words. Resources like dictionaries, wordlists, grammar books, phrases book or journals or other written articles downloaded from internet might be valuable to help learners to produce messages on the new language (Oxford, 1990). Using resources for receiving and sending messages is one of the strategies in receiving and sending messages.

Good guesser is clearly an important part of the learning process for them. If they read or listen to something in English and come across a word that they are not familiar with, they will take a chance to guess, using contextual clues even though their guessing is not really the real answer. Only if the word is used repeatedly and they still have no idea, will they
sort out again using a dictionary. If someone is speaking to them in English, and they are having difficulty in understanding a good part of it, they will often try to guess, by paying attention to the meaning. The following statement by Rubin (1975:45) will perfectly support my findings:

A good language learner is a good guesser that is he gathers and stores information in an efficient manner so it can be easily retrieved. He may listen to a phrase, pick out the words he understands and infer the rest. He may actively look for clues to meaning in the topic, setting, or attitudes of the speakers. His guessing strategy may be stratified from the more general to the specific so that he gets the most information from each question or sentence.

Based on the results, the respondents employed getting help strategy by asking their teacher or lecturer even an expert to assist them when talking to someone, and therefore she/he can help them by giving words or expressions that they had not understood yet. Another way of getting help from someone speaking is asking him/her to slow down or to repeat once more the part that they did not understand. Open and honest communication helps to build deeper and stronger relationships between people. Those that came to the lesson with some anxiety felt more relaxed and ‘lowered their guard’ and at the end of the lesson left with a sense of hope and encouragement. Students saw the teacher as a facilitator and resource, one who is there to help with the learning process and not in a dictating role (Brown, 2001).

Based on the results, the respondents try to focus their attention so that they can get more information from the spoken text they are listening to. They do not concern with all the words that they hear (Hedge, 2000). Students who have some awareness of the ways they need to process information have a distinct advantage over those who do not. For example, students who struggle with listening text will know to take notes and to listen to key words.

In arranging and planning learning, the learners make use of listening to music and watching films as the effective ways to improve their listening skills and also their pronunciation. For instance, they try to imitate the singer’s pronunciation and her/his accent. They also clearly state that they have reason why they learn English. They have something to reach in order to be better. As Nunan (1999) states that, making goals explicit help learners to focus on the ‘task to come’, which enhances their motivation and performance. Learners have a clearer picture of what is expected of them and will be able to reflect on how they can accomplish the objectives that were set out. This may bring to the forefront a complete new set of expectations, interests and strategies and even concerns.

The respondents employ strategies namely using music, which is based on listening to music which soothes them either before or during stressful situations. The importance of music mainly that is to create relaxation and provide variety and fun. Another strategy employed by the respondents that is using laughter. It is a factor of creating a positive mood as well and it is a natural part of everyday life. They also make use of making some jokes to find their good mood, watching a movie and going somewhere are other ways to make them relaxed.

The respondents understand that to make themselves concentrate more, they have to calm down. They understand well that if they keep forcing themselves to work on something too difficult to finish, it can make them frustrated, so that the expression “take it easy” or take a deep breath can be very helpful for them to control their emotional tempers. They also try to find someone who can help them get explanation to solve their problem. If that way cannot assist them then they will stop for a while and take it easy. From the findings, it can be inferred that all respondents really try to avoid something that can make them frustrated or confused.

All the respondents employ this strategy particularly when they are faced with extremely complicated assignment. They ask their lecturers’ help to give more explanations of particular topic that they do not comprehend. Students who ask for feedback or clarification, either in their journals, or during task feedback, also advance faster than others. As Oxford states, asking questions “helps learners to get closer to the intended meaning and thus aids their understanding” (Oxford 1990). They are taking an active role in their own learning that this is the case. When students accept and respond to feedback, they embrace their learning more and remember the language better. “The deeper the learning experience the learner has in the language, the deeper the language will sink in” (Woodward, 2001).

Generally, learners who actively participate do better and progress faster. Learners who typically shy away from doing pair work and group mingles and/or who find ways to not have to participate in class discussions, tend to improve at a slower rate. This is often connected to their fear of making errors or of taking
risks or of looking foolish in the eyes of their peers. Related to these strategies, interview findings revealed that the respondents are actively involved in conversation to keep their language alive. By doing cooperative work with others, they want to acquire new words or expressions. They really understand how to use the people all around to help reach their goal of fluency in English. They also share the problems with their close friends whom they believe could help them or someone expert in it to overcome the problem, for instance a teacher/lecturer.

The results have revealed significant aspects concerning the strategy employed by the respondents. These respondents are able to concentrate and pay attention to the teacher as a whole class. They are also able to lead their pairs in giving orders and offering help to each other. They are able to take an active part in the activities and learning tasks carried out in class. They easily identify language mistakes. They are not afraid of making mistakes. On the contrary, they are willing to make mistakes in order to learn and to communicate when they are given a problem to solve in pairs/group. They attempt to use the language with their pairs and imitate their lecturer.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

Five learners have some similar ways to be successful. They develop learning strategies that suit them best. They willingly immerse into various types of learning strategies and these strategies have become the main device that finally leads them to success. The more strategies they are willing to deal with the more they become successful learners.

From the ten strategies that have been found from five respondents, the researcher concludes that good or successful language learners have a strong desire to communicate, they are willing to guess and are not afraid of being wrong or appearing foolish. This does not mean that they do not care about correctness. They have self-confidence. They always try to practice: for instance, they try pronouncing words or making up sentences. They seek out opportunities to use the language by looking for partner or an expert. They try to make conversations with their fellows in the target language. They usually take advantage of every available opportunity to speak up either in or outside the class. They also pay an

exceptional attention to the form and meaning in the target language. Additionally, good language learners monitor their own language and the language of those around them. In short, the learners are capable of taking an active role in their own learning by the use of language learning strategies.

All language learners, therefore, must know and comprehend all learning strategies and consider and act the activities done by the successful language learners. Many language learners avoid using the language in the early stages for fear of in communication, practice in class but few practice enough outside the classroom, if they don’t know the correct word or phrase for what they wish to communicate, simply avoid the subject completely, afraid of making mistakes and they say nothing until they are sure that they can say it absolutely correctly. The successful learner, on the other hand, uses the language at every opportunity, practices what they have just learnt as soon as possible, possessing such a strong desire to communicate, are not afraid of making mistake.

The teachers of language need to teach learning strategies explicitly in the classroom while doing language task. They need to show that the greatest benefit they can give on their learners is to help them to “learn how to learn”. Learners need to know learning strategies that are useful not only for the classroom setting but also for the outside world. Then, they will use the strategy for improving and maintaining their language.

Suggestions

(1) The teachers should be able to guide learners in their learning process. (2) Showing them how language learning strategies are helpful for effective learning. (3) The teachers need to look for methods which best suit the needs of their particular learners in a given situation. (4) Teachers need to be resourceful, flexible, and ready to adapt and try a variety of teaching styles and techniques in order to help their students achieve success in language learning. (5) Teachers must be sensitive to change strategies in order to continue helping learners become more successful.

REFERENCES


