

## English Learning Strategy and Learner's Cultural Background

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### Abstract

English as a second or foreign language, it is often found that learning English is not an easy task. In order to overcome that difficulty, there are many factors that can be counted in, including learning strategies. Learning strategies are considered as self-improvement devices that might be driven by learners themselves or by teachers. In addition, culture might play important role in determining learning strategy since culture cannot be separated from language as well as its learning/teaching. This paper attempts to provide a learning strategy that might meet with Indonesian students' cultural background. As noticed, Indonesians commonly hold mutual assistance as one of life principles. Hence, this paper also provides an explanation concerning learning strategy which may meet with mutual assistance principle: collaborative learning.

**Keywords:** *Strategies; EFL; ESL; Collaborative; Cultural.*

### Abstrak

Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa kedua atau bahasa asing, sering ditemukan bahwa belajar bahasa Inggris bukanlah tugas yang mudah. Untuk mengatasi kesulitan itu, ada banyak faktor yang bisa diperhitungkan, termasuk strategi pembelajaran. Strategi pembelajaran dianggap sebagai perangkat perbaikan diri yang mungkin didorong oleh peserta didik sendiri atau oleh guru. Selain itu, budaya mungkin memainkan peran penting dalam menentukan strategi pembelajaran karena budaya tidak dapat dipisahkan dari bahasa serta belajar/mengajarnya. Makalah ini mencoba untuk memberikan strategi pembelajaran yang mungkin sesuai dengan latar belakang budaya siswa Indonesia. Sebagaimana diketahui, masyarakat Indonesia pada umumnya menganut gotong royong sebagai salah satu prinsip hidup. Oleh karena itu, makalah ini juga memberikan penjelasan mengenai strategi pembelajaran yang dapat memenuhi prinsip gotong royong: pembelajaran kolaboratif.

**Kata kunci:** *Strategi; EFL; ESL; Kolaboratif; Budaya.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

English has been becoming one of the most frequently spoken languages in the world nowadays. Harmer (2001) describes English as lingua franca. Then, he further defines lingua franca as a bridging language, for it is a language which is used by two people who have different languages in which both of them are non-English speakers in order to build communication. In other words, English has been placed as the second language (L2) in many countries all over the world. Hence, English learning has been an essential domain up until the present time and it might keep continuing its existence in the future regarding its important role in international business. Harmer (2001) claims that even people who do not really know about English are still familiarized with some English vocabulary. Thus, this is what makes English have become one of languages which is primarily used in international setting. English language learning can be a difficult task for the second or foreign language learners. First of all, to differentiate between the second and foreign language learner is as Oxford (2003) defines, a second language is a language studied in a setting where that language is the main vehicle of everyday communication and where abundant input exists in that language. A foreign language is a language studied in an environment where it is not the primary vehicle for daily interaction and where input in that language is restricted (p.1a).

Based on the statement, it is fine to say that Indonesia does not have what is so-called the second language since the term “the second language” might be employed because the citizens of particular countries commonly use certain languages other than the first language. In addition, Indonesians under certain circumstances prefer using their regional languages (mother tongue) to using foreign languages. According to Ashworth as cited in Silva (2008), “Mother tongue or native language is the language which the person acquires in early years and which normally becomes her natural instrument of thought and communication”. In other words, language that exposes person since the first time he or she is raised and it is still continued to be learnt through daily communication so that it is maintained autonomously is called as mother tongue. For instance, there are many mother tongues or native languages in Indonesia such as Javanese, Sundanese, Bugis, and so on. It can be exemplified about the use of mother tongue in certain situation: Javanese people tend to use Javanese when they are communicating with other Javanese even though in formal context. In brief, it can be said that Indonesians have no common language the second language other than the national language. Therefore, it is correct if English is considered as foreign language in Indonesia.

Furthermore, a question that might raise is “How can Indonesian students learn and improve their English while they are neither the first nor the second, but the foreign learners?”. Then, it is answered by Oxford (2003, p.1b) who points out, “Language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how – and how well – our students learn a second or foreign language”. Therefore, this paper presents some information about language learning strategies and it attempts to provide about one of learning strategies that can be appropriately implemented for Indonesian students regarding Indonesian culture.

## **II. METHODS**

This article is based on a literature review (library research) obtained from various reliable sources. This research was conducted by collecting and analyzing written sources related to English learning strategies by taking into account the cultural background of students. Learning strategies consist of direct learning strategies and indirect learning strategies. This article also uses several related references learning strategies can be adjusted due to many factors including cultural background of the learners. As mentioned earlier, language and culture are inseparable. In teaching and learning language, both teachers and learners/students have to be aware of the cultures prevailing in the target language. Therefore, the teaching and learning process can be meaningful. In terms of culture, Indonesia is familiar with its harmoniousness. Indonesian people get used to live in multiplicity/diversity. They usually establish communication regardless of the difference among them. In addition, Indonesian people also hold mutual assistance principle (gotong royong). They usually work together to accomplish certain thing at certain situation like re-establishing bridge, building public garbage collection, and so on.

## **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **A. The Nature of Learning Strategy**

Freiberg and Driscoll (1992) define learning strategy as a typical action which is applicable for achieving various objectives of teaching at any levels or any students in various contexts as well. Rubin (1975, p.43) defines learning strategies as “The techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge”. Furthermore, there have been different opinions concerning the definition of strategy by Politzer and McGroarty, Seliger, Stern as cited in Griffiths (2004, p.1) as “learning behaviours, tactics, and techniques” which then they can be drawn into one definition as Scarella and Oxford (1992, p.63) define; learning strategies are best defined as “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students apply to overcome the difficulties enabling them to improve their learning”. Besides, Rigney as cited in O’Malley et al. (1985, p.23) uses the definition of learning strategy as follows, “Operations or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information”. However, Dick and Carey (1996) argue that learning strategy is not only concerned with the actions or behaviors, but it also includes the learning material and all of the learning components as well. Thus, it clearly states that learning strategy deals not only with the way of students to improve their language through some actions such as collaborating with other students, peer-reviewing, and so on, but also with learning procedures and learning devices.

By the definition, learning strategy is preferred by students themselves as a means of self-enhancement. Moreover, learning strategy is also intended to enable students to obtain the learning objectives. Gerlach and Ely (1980) suggested that it is necessary to engage the learning strategy with the learning objectives in order to create such effective and efficient learning activities. Therefore, the two components of learning such as learning strategy and learning objectives are fitted so that learning process can go smoothly. In addition, Pressley and McCormick (1995) stated that learning strategy is chosen by intention of the students which means learning strategy occurs in conscious mind of the students. Accordingly, Oxford (1990) also maintains the same idea about consciousness in learning strategy. Hence, learning strategy is arbitrarily used by learners as long as it can assist them to obtain the learning goal. As mentioned earlier, learning strategy can be a useful device to help the second or foreign language learners in learning English. This notion is then strengthened by Oxford (2003, p.8) stating that the following conditions might affect the success of learning strategies employed:

- a) The learning strategies are relevant with the L2 task.
- b) The strategies are in line with students' style and preferences.
- c) The students can apply one strategy as well as combine a strategy with another strategy relevantly.

From the second and third points of the previous explanation, it is implied that the success of learning strategies depends primarily on the students themselves. However, there is still another point mentioning about the task of the target language. The tasks given should have to do with the learning strategies chosen. In addition, Rubin and Stern as cited in Oxford (2003) shares the same ideas saying that the students themselves who are responsible for the success of learning. Eventually, Liang (2009, p. 199) comes to conclusion about the characteristics of learning strategies whether they are:

- d) They are both behavioral/observable and mental/unobservable.
- e) Learning strategies can be considered as general approach or specific actions.
- f) Learning strategies are students' conscious preferences.

According to the aforementioned explanation, the three characteristics of learning strategies are in line with some previous experts' ideas. Then, it can be inferred that learning strategies may be maintained by students consciously (students are aware of learning strategies they use), yet it might be subconsciously driven because of certain conditions surrounding in order to gain the learning objective.

## **B. The Types of Learning Strategies**

Before starting language teaching, teachers can consider some teaching strategies as well because learning strategies might be driven by the teachers/instructors. According to Prince and Felder (2007), "Science courses are traditionally taught deductively. The instructor first teaches students relevant theory and mathematical models, then moves on to textbook exercises, and eventually-maybe-gets to real-world applications". The aforementioned statement makes clear that deductive teaching is considered traditional. In Indonesia, such learning is a commonality. Teachers tend to explain the material first, so then students are expected to be able to do the task later on. However, Prince and Felder (2007) argue that such way of teaching may lead into failure since it cannot fully motivate students/learners. Furthermore, Prince and Felder (2007) claim that inductive teaching is better than deductive teaching.

The concept of inductive teaching is as Prince and Felder (2007) state, "The instructor begins by presenting students with a specific challenge, such as experimental data to interpret, a case study to analyze, or a complex real-world problem to solve" (p.14). In other words, inductive teaching strategy allows teachers to alter the teacher-centered teaching to students-centered teaching. Then, Prince and Felder (2006) go on maintaining, "These methods have many features in common, besides the fact that they all qualify as inductive. They are all learner-centered (aka student-centered), meaning that they impose more responsibility on students for their own learning than the traditional lecture-based deductive approach does"(p.2). As explained, students are directly

given task as they join the class. Besides, students are exposed with real-like problem to be solved through the learning. In addition, they are also responsibly permitted to find and choose their strategies in accomplishing the exercise given. Consequently, it can be concluded that this inductive teaching might be applied for the second or foreign language learners in order to have them introduced to learning strategy they may employ.

Naiman, et al. and Rubin as cited in O'Malley and Chamot (1995) have made the identification of some strategies. According to Naiman et al. as cited in O'Malley and Chamot (1995, p.6), learning strategies are comprised of two categories namely primary categories and secondary categories which they call as a technique for second language learning. They reported that primary categories are different from secondary ones. As mentioned, the secondary categories are addressed to second language learners. They can be referred to several techniques such as sound acquisition, grammar, vocabulary, listening comprehension, learning to talk, learning to write, and learning to read. Meanwhile, Rubin as cited in O'Malley and Chamot (1995, p. 4) comes with different notions concerning learning strategy categorization. The categories are classified into two categories: the primary category which is comprised of strategies that give direct effect towards the learners and the secondary category consisting of strategies that give indirect effect towards the learners.

Likely similar to Rubin in O'Malley and Chamot (1995) regarding the types of learning strategies, Oxford (1990) has proposed two main categories of learning strategies: the direct strategy and the indirect strategy. The direct strategy consists of three types namely memory strategy (strategy to receive and preserve certain information from the target language), cognitive strategy (strategy to comprehend the target language), and compensation strategies (strategy to use target language in spite of the limitations of knowledge). On the other hand, the indirect strategy deals with three subdivisions: meta-cognitive strategy (strategy to plan, organize, monitor, and asses learning), affective strategy (strategy to maintain learning motivation), and social strategy (strategy to establish interaction with other learners). The further explanations of each strategy are as follows:

1) Direct Learning Strategy

a) Memory Strategy

The memory strategy has to do with memorization ability of the learners. The language learners attempt to make use of some previous learning experience as well as knowledge as the means of learning. Activity that can be exemplified is when a learner is attempting to remember correct pronunciation including the stressed syllables, the unstressed syllables, the weakening of the sound by repeating/copying those sounds. Besides, another example of memory strategy is when a language learner has to remember some words that include gerunds in grammar class. Those activities are well- defined as the memory strategy.

b) Cognitive Strategy

The cognitive strategy refers to learners' behaviors during learning which are interconnected with critical thinking of the learners. The activities depicted the cognitive strategy might vary such as reading argumentative essay, conducting critical summary of the argumentative essay having been read, doing self-correction over the summary that has been made, and so on.

c) Compensation Strategy

The compensation strategy, as mentioned earlier, deals with the strategy of learners to manipulate their limitations of knowledge during learning process. For instance, learners who are aware of their lacks in certain situation tend to alter their choices to something that they know most. For the clearer example is like when a learner freely picks a topic to be presented that he/she knows most rather than he/she choose other topics that they partly know or even totally out of their knowledge, it can be included in the compensation strategy.

2) Indirect Learning Strategy

a) Meta-cognitive Strategy

The meta-cognitive strategy can be defined as the way of the learners in organizing the learning process including planning, conducting, monitoring, and self assessing. The learners can choose their own learning material in terms of learning plan. Besides, they can also evaluate the entire learning process in order to determine whether it is well fitted with their learning plan or not.

b) Affective Strategy

By the definition, the affective strategy can be referred to the overall responses and behaviors of the learners towards the learning process. Furthermore, it can be said that this strategy is functioned to maintain the learners' motivation all along the learning process. The response or behavior of the learners might be positive or negative. Positive response indicates that the learning process is put in high value by the learners. They accept the learning process as the way it is. Meanwhile, negative response indicates the way around. The learners perform their ignorance during learning process can be taken as negative response.

c) Social Strategy

The social strategy consists of two terms namely social and strategy. As mentioned, strategy can be referred to way, behavior, technique, and so on. Meanwhile, social means anything that deals with learners' interaction. Therefore, the social strategy can be described as the behavior the learners which is related to mutual interaction together with their classmates that can be used to achieve the goal of learning. Ellis (1994) stated that what Oxford had proposed concerning learning strategy classification might be the most complete among others'. However, Oxford, Levine, and Crookall (1989, p.29) point out that there are "dozens and perhaps hundreds of such strategies exist". Putting it differently, there are always other possible learning strategies that the learners can select.

### C. Learning Strategies for Indonesian Students

1) Language Learners' Culture in Language Learning

Khamkhien (2010) has pointed out several factors that can influence language learning which include cultural background. Actually, teachers/ instructors should understand about the importance of cultural background of language usage. The knowledge of cultural background can lead to a meaningful learning process. Students who are knowledgeable of cultural background of the target language may appropriately employ the language within the right context. Kuo and Lai (n.d.) contend, "Culture must be incorporated outright as an essential component of second language learning and teaching" (p.1a). Based on previous argumentation, the domain of language learning and teaching cannot be separated from culture. However, Sapir in Genc and Bada (2005) commented that there was no correlation between language and culture. Again, it is refuted by Tedjasuksmana (2013) who maintains,

*Communication in real situations cannot be separated from context, and culture is part of the context. Since culture is part of the context, communication is rarely culture-free. This gives the impact that language learning and learning about target culture cannot realistically be separated. (p.196)*

By way of explanation, it clearly strengthens argumentation about the correlation between language and culture. In addition, it is mentioned that language learning and teaching have to do with communication. Furthermore, the reason is because language can be employed as a means of communication. It is in line with Hymes as cited in Richards and Rodgers (1999) who points out, "The goal of language teaching is what he referred to communicative competence" (p.69). In addition, since communication is established upon certain context in which culture prevails, teaching and learning language cannot exclude the culture of target language. Englebert as cited in Leveridge (2008) maintains that teaching foreign language deals also with foreign culture, and it is teacher who has to be aware of the culture of learners which may vary. It is, therefore, teacher's duty to synchronize the culture of target language with learners' culture as Kuo and Lai (n.d.) contend,

*Second language teachers, therefore, should pay more attentions to the diversities of cultures, identify key cultural items in every aspect when they design a language curriculum, and apply appropriate teaching strategies to learning activities in order to help students to bridge the culture gaps. (p.1b)*

According to the explanation, it can be put differently that cultural shock might happen during language teaching and learning. Nevertheless, in encountering such gap, teachers or instructors can have some manners to determine the most appropriate way in terms of the learning techniques or strategies which match with learners' culture. Besides, Kuo and Lai (n.d.) confidently consider second language learning as cultural learning, both the target language culture and the learners' culture. Moreover, Thanasoulas (2001) has pointed out his notion concerning foreign language learning in which it is divided into four dimensions namely grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, teacher's or learner's perception to culture. It apparently declares that culture cannot be excluded within foreign language learning. Regarding the notion of competence mentioned earlier, Canale and Swain (1980) consider that communicative competence requires grammatical competence. They further stated that communicative competence is comprised of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The definition of each is then explained by Richards and Rodgers (1999) as follows,

*Grammatical competence refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence and what Hymes intends by what is "formally possible." It is the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity. Sociolinguistic competence refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction. Discourse competence refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text. Strategic competence refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication. (p. 71)*

Based on the statement concerning the four dimensions of communicative competence, grammatical competence deals with the linguistic components such as grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of language. Then, sociolinguistic competence talks about how learners can deal with environment in which they establish communication by considering some factors such as formality, politeness, the role in communication, and so on. Moreover, discourse competence can be defined as the ability to link or share ideas/thoughts through sentences or utterances. In other words, it deals with the ability of learners to make use of language for conveying their ideas. Furthermore, what is meant with strategic competence is the speakers know how to keep communication being preserved. Besides, it can be referred to the ability of speaker to prevent communication failure by anticipating some breakdown-causing factors such as lack of grammar/vocabulary, nervousness, inadequate knowledge of sociolinguistic, and so on. Based on the explanation, it also indicates that to obtain communicative competence, the knowledge of culture/context is required.

## 2) Collaborative Learning for Indonesian Students

Regarding the culture of Indonesia, Indonesia has been well-known for its harmonious society in which multiplicity is considered as national pride. Furthermore, in Indonesia mutual assistance principle (aka gotong royong) is upheld. In Indonesian society, it is common to see many people work together at certain occasion without worrying/questioning about fee. In this context, their concern is not about gaining financial support. Instead, the common interest that they would like to share is social interaction to preserve harmonious atmosphere. Subconsciously, this principle might affect their way to overcome difficulties they may face including in language learning. Therefore, it can be inferred that culture can affect Indonesian learners in preferring learning strategy in order to enhance their English.

As mentioned, teachers can also be the ones who drive students to apply learning strategies. One of strategies provided by teachers which may meet with mutual assistance value and

principle of Indonesia is collaborative learning. Collaborative learning provides opportunity for students to actively participate in class and minimize the diversities among them. Before coming to the definition of collaborative learning, Panitz (1996) would like to distinguish, "Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle whereas cooperation is a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of an end product or goal" (p.1). In other words, collaboration is concerned with interaction whereas cooperation is focused on the product or goal. To make it clearer, Gokhale (1995) defines collaborative learning as the way of learning in which students who share common goal work together so that all of them may successfully achieve the goal. In other words, students accommodate each other during learning so that the essence of what is learnt can be distributed throughout. Therefore, it implies that what is stressed in collaborative learning is the process rather than the product. This concept might answer the confusing term between collaborative and cooperative.

In addition, it is as Inglehart, Narko, and Zimmerman assert, "Cooperative learning focuses on individual mastery of the subject through the group work" (p.188). Then, they further point out that the individual product is its final goal. On the contrary, in collaborative learning teachers have students participated during the process of learning in order to achieve a better objective that they share. According to Davidson and Major (2014), "This shortcoming may be due to differences in disciplinary orientation of their leading contributors—mainly psychology in cooperative learning, and language and literature in collaborative learning" (p.18). Then, it obviously states that one of collaborative learning's main orientations is language. By the definition, language which plays important role during learning process is highlighted. Consequently, students who are involved within learning process can indirectly improve their language which is in this case is English. Furthermore, regarding collaborative learning as Panitz (1996) explained, it can be drawn some characteristics as follows:

- a. Collaborative learning is not merely classroom strategy, but also learning philosophy.
- b. Students' contributions are highly valued.
- c. Every student involved is responsible for the success of their own as well as the groups'.
- d. It is intended to establish mutual understanding rather than competition.
- e. Indirectly through the learning process, it can teach students about how to deal with others in respect.

In brief, collaborative learning can be considered as a strategy of learning that can fulfill some aspects of Oxford's notions concerning two main divisions of learning strategy. Through collaborative learning, students are allowed to have interaction within society, compensate other's lacks, maintain motivation either their own or others', and so on. Therefore, based on some explanations mentioned earlier concerning collaborative learning, it can be simplified that collaborative learning covers the participation of each student within learning process allowing them to help each other as a form of contribution in order to obtain the objective they share.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Learning strategy can be defined as the way or technique of learners to enhance or improve the target language that they learn. Learning strategy can be categorized as self-enhancement device of language learning since it can be freely chosen and adjusted by learners themselves. Moreover, there are also several types of learning strategies as Oxford (1990) suggested such as direct learning strategy and indirect learning strategy. The two categories are then divided into some sub-categories namely memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, meta-cognitive strategy, affective strategy, and social strategy. The three-first categories are included in direct learning strategy whereas the three latter strategies are the indirect one.

On its development, learning strategies can be adjusted due to many factors including cultural background of the learners. As mentioned earlier, language and culture are inseparable. In teaching and learning language, both teachers and learners/students have to be aware of the cultures prevailing in the target language. Therefore, the teaching and learning process can be meaningful. In terms of culture, Indonesia is familiar with its harmoniousness. Indonesian people get used to live in multiplicity/diversity. They usually establish communication regardless of the difference among them. In addition, Indonesian people also hold mutual assistance principle (gotong royong).

They usually work together to accomplish certain thing at certain situation like re-establishing bridge, building public garbage collection, and so on. Hence, this culture might be brought into learning activity as well.

The strategy of learning that might be in line with mutual assistance principle is collaborative learning. Having been mentioned earlier, collaborative learning involves the whole member of a group to actively participate and contribute to the learning process in order to achieve the goal that learners/students mutually share. Besides, collaborative learning can also be considered to be able to meet some aspects concerning direct and indirect learning strategy proposed by Oxford. It can enable students to build interaction within group, to maintain individual's motivation as well as group's motivation, to compensate other's lacks, and so on. However, there are still many other strategies which might be more suited to Indonesian students like what Oxford, Lavine, and Crookall (1989) said. There are other points of view other than cultural background that can be considered to determine the learning strategy chosen.

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