

HOW MALAYSIAN DIPLOMA STUDENTS COMPENSATE FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING: A SURVEY STUDY

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Abstract: *This study was conducted to investigate the compensatory strategies used by Malaysian students in a public university in learning English. The research gap that this study aims to fill is the lack of research on the use of compensatory strategies by Malaysian students. To achieve the main objective, the study conducted a survey using questionnaire items from Oxford's (1990) LLS focusing only on compensatory strategies and distributed to first and third semester students. Based on the responses of 152 respondents, the study found that students prefer to use word substitutions and gestures when they cannot think of an English word. They also tend to make guesses when trying to understand unfamiliar English words and predict what the other person will say next. In contrast, students rarely think of new words, and they are unable to read English without looking up each new word. The use of means and standard deviations provided a more accurate measure of the data obtained from the survey. The results suggest that the use of compensatory strategies is widespread among Malaysian students and that they prefer certain strategies over others. The study highlights the importance of considering compensatory strategies in language learning and teaching, especially for learners who are new to the language. The study concludes that a better understanding of compensatory strategies can help teachers develop appropriate instructional materials and strategies that address learners' specific needs.*

Keywords: *English language learning, compensatory strategies, Oxford's LLS*

Introduction

In Malaysia, English is introduced as a subject in primary school when students are seven years old, and it is continued for six years at the primary level and five more years in secondary school. Throughout their education, Malaysian learners take three national-based assessments, one at the end of primary school, another at the end of lower secondary school, and the last at the end of upper secondary school. It is mandatory for students who sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Examination (SPM) to pass the English language paper along with four other subjects to pursue higher education. English courses are still compulsory for undergraduate students, depending on their skill level, which is determined by the Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET) administered by the Malaysian Education Council. The MUET test assesses listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and must be taken by pre-university learners before they commence their undergraduate programs at any Malaysian state universities. Malaysian ESL learners in higher education, like many other second language learners, face challenges in acquiring English due to factors such as their first language background, exposure to the language, and lack of opportunities to speak and write in English (Bhaskaran, 2018). Therefore, compensatory strategies can be an effective tool for these learners to improve their English language proficiency.

Compensatory strategies are commonly used by second language learners to overcome language deficits. These strategies involve using alternative approaches to communicate meaning when faced with language, which Oxford (1990) specifically refers to the learner finding synonyms from the context of the reading, and their reliance on non-verbal communication, such as gestures, to communicate meaning when the exact meaning of a statement is not understood (Shakarami et al., 2017). Despite the growing research interest in compensation strategies in second language learning, there are still gaps in the literature that warrant further investigation. One of these gaps is the limited understanding of how compensation strategies are used by ESL learners in specific contexts, such as higher education in Malaysia. While studies have examined the use of compensatory strategies among Malaysian ESL learners (Sani & Ismail, 2021), further research is needed to understand the factors that influence the use of compensatory strategies in this context.

Developing effective language learning strategies is critical to students' progress in their language skills. Without appropriate strategies, students have difficulty making progress and may end up wasting their time. For Malaysian students, who have typically received 10 years of formal English lesson at the primary and secondary levels, the lack of effective strategies is a common problem. This can be attributed to several factors, including their poor familiarity with various strategies and their potential benefits. Although there are numerous strategies for language learning, this study focuses specifically on the compensation strategy because of its importance to Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. Compensation strategy is about filling gaps in language knowledge and skills through alternative means. It is particularly relevant for Malaysian learners because they often face language challenges arising from differences between their first language (e.g., Malay) and English.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the compensation strategies used by Malaysian undergraduates in a public university learning English. Understanding the specific strategies employed by these students will provide valuable insights into their language learning process and help identify effective approaches to address their linguistic challenges. By examining the compensation strategies utilized by Malaysian graduate students, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how these learners cope with language gaps and navigate their academic and

social interactions in an English-speaking environment. The study aims to determine the extent to which students use the six compensatory strategies identified by Oxford (1990), namely: guessing, using gestures, not looking up every new word, using word substitutions, inventing new words, and switching to the first language. The study uses means and standard deviations to analyze the data obtained from the survey. The study provides insight into the compensatory strategies Malaysian graduate students use in learning English. The findings could be useful for educators to develop effective language learning strategies for students who face similar language learning challenges. The use of means and standard deviations in analyzing the data allows for a better understanding of the extent to which respondents use the identified compensation strategies.

Literature review

Contemporary studies have focused on examining the use of compensatory strategies in different contexts to understand how learners use them to improve their second language learning outcomes. Aziz and Shah's (2020) findings on ESL learners in polytechnic show high preference for cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and low preference for compensation strategies. Additionally, students of both genders show similar pattern in the use of strategies except for memory strategies where female students were found to have better ability to memorize things than the male. Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2020) investigated the use of compensation strategies among Omani university students learning English as a foreign language and found that cognitive and metacognitive strategies, such as making associations and setting language learning goals, were the most frequently used compensation strategies. The study also found that students' motivation level and self-efficacy were significant predictors of their use of compensatory strategies.

Recent research has also highlighted the importance of explicitly teaching learners compensation strategies to improve their language learning outcomes. Zhang and Zhang (2021) investigated the effects of explicit teaching of compensation strategies on Chinese English-as-a-foreign-language learners and found that explicit teaching of compensation strategies led to significant improvements in learners' language proficiency and their use of compensation strategies. These findings suggest that compensatory strategies are critical to second language learning and that their use varies according to learners' cultural backgrounds, language proficiency levels, and learning contexts.

Earlier studies on compensation strategies and language learning date back to the 1980s, when researchers began to investigate how second language learners compensate for their language deficits (Tarone & Yule, 1989). One of the first studies on this topic was conducted by Rubin (1975), who identified four main types of language learning strategies, including compensatory strategies, used by second language learners. These early studies laid the foundation for further research on compensatory strategies in language learning and led to increased interest in this topic in the following decades. For example, several studies in the 1990s examined the relationship between compensatory strategies and language proficiency (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997). More recently, studies have examined compensation strategies in the context of specific learner populations, e.g., Chinese learners (Zhang & Zhang, 2017), Arab learners (Shakarami et al., 2017) and Iranian learners (Karbalaee & Negin, 2014; Taheri & Davoudi, 2016). In addition to compensatory strategies, other researchers have investigated language learning strategies (LLS) in different populations, such as Indonesian learners (Rachmawati, 2013) and Malaysian learners (Aziz & Shah, 2020), while Fathiyah et al. (2020) compared

Malaysian, Pakistani, and Italian ESL learners with Indonesian EFL learners in terms of their LLS use.

Previous research has shown that compensation strategies play an important role in second language learning. According to Ellis (2015), compensatory strategies are essential tools for second language learners to communicate effectively when faced with language barriers. In the context of Malaysian ESL learners in higher education, studies have found that compensation strategies are commonly used by learners to overcome their language deficits (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Siddiquee, 2016). In addition, studies have identified different types of compensation strategies used by ESL learners, including lexical, syntactic, phonological, and discourse strategies (Dalman & Plonsky, 2022). These strategies have been shown to be effective in improving fluency and facilitating communication in English (Ahmad & Ismail, 2013). However, there are also limitations to the use of compensatory strategies, such as overreliance on these strategies and their potential to hinder the development of accurate language production (Ahmad & Ismail, 2013). Therefore, further research is needed to gain a better understanding of the types of compensatory strategies used by Malaysian ESL learners in higher education.

Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional research design to investigate the relationship between compensatory strategies and language learning among graduate students at a public college in Malaysia. The study population consisted of students currently enrolled in a diploma program at the college, and 152 respondents were selected through random sampling.

The study used a mixed methods approach to collect data. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, while open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative data. The questionnaire was developed based on Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and was used to measure compensatory strategies. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they used various compensatory strategies such as paraphrasing, using gestures, and guessing from context. Oxford's (1990) language learning strategies are still relevant 33 years later because they offer timeless principles that guide learners in their pursuit of language proficiency. These strategies address key aspects of language acquisition and can be adapted to different contexts and individual preferences. They emphasize active engagement, goal setting, strategic planning, learner autonomy, and metacognitive awareness. The Oxford framework accommodates the multifaceted nature of language learning and offers learners flexibility in choosing strategies that meet their needs. The focus on metacognitive skills allows learners to reflect, monitor progress, and adjust strategies accordingly. Overall, Oxford's strategies remain valuable in empowering learners and guiding them toward success in language learning.

For data analysis, the researchers used descriptive statistics with SPSS, which included calculating mode, median, mean, and standard deviation. Since quantitative descriptive studies aim to describe and summarize data collected from a sample or population, mean and standard deviation are common statistical measures to summarize the central tendency and variability of a variable of interest. The mean is a measure of central tendency that indicates the average value of a variable. It is calculated by adding all the values of a variable and dividing by the number of observations. The standard deviation, on the other hand, is a measure of variability that indicates how much the values of a variable deviate from the mean. It is calculated by taking

the square root of the variance, which is the sum of the squared differences between each value and the mean, divided by the number of observations minus one.

The mean and standard deviation provide a comprehensive summary of the distribution of a variable. Reporting these measures in a quantitative descriptive study allows researchers to indicate the typical value of a variable and the extent of variability within the sample or population. However, limitations of the study include that a random sample was used, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other populations. In addition, the self-report nature of the questionnaire may lead to response bias.

Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1 lists the six items in Oxford's (1990) compensatory strategies. Of the six items, item (i) and (v) involve making guesses, item (iii) and (vi) imply the use of word substitutions, while item (ii) suggests the use of gestures. Item (iv), on the other hand, suggests that learners do not look up every new word while reading English. First of all, the standard deviation values in this survey range from 1.290 to 1.730, which means they are not greater than $\pm 2SD$, so the measurements are closer to the true value. The standard deviation is a quantity that expresses how much the members of a group deviate from the mean of the group. It indicates the dispersion of the values in a sample. Between making up new words (iii) and using a word or phrase that means the same thing (vi), the latter had a higher mean (5.59), which is also the highest among the six items. This shows that the respondents are able to find an English word or phrase as a substitute for an English word that they cannot recall at the moment of speaking or writing, rather than inventing a new word. After item (vi), item (ii) yielded the second highest mean score (5.25), which is only slightly higher than item (i) ($M=5.14$). Item (ii) is about the use of gestures when one cannot think of a word during a conversation in English.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Compensation Strategy Items

No.	Items	Mode	Mean	SD
i	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	5	5.14	1.388
ii	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	6	5.25	1.397
iii	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	6	4.30	1.730
iv	I read English without looking up every new word.	4	3.72	1.541
v	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	4	4.70	1.433
vi	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	4	5.59	1.294

Making guesses yielded average mean values (5.14 and 4.70) for items (i) and (v), respectively. The first strategy, "To understand unknown English words, I make guesses," is relevant to both reading and listening, while item (v) is relevant to listening. Respondents also disagree that they read English without looking up each new word, suggesting that they look up the meaning of English words they do not understand. This is reflected in the lowest mean score (3.72) obtained for item (iv). The only questions are how often they do this and to what extent they are willing to look up new words to understand a text.

Analysis of the survey data reveals interesting results regarding the strategies respondents use with regard to unfamiliar English words. The average mean scores for items (i) and (v) show that respondents frequently make guesses to understand unknown English words in both reading and listening contexts. This indicates that respondents rely on their contextual and linguistic knowledge to infer the meaning of unknown words. However, for item (iv), which

assesses whether respondents read English without looking up each new word, the average mean score is comparatively lower. This means that respondents are more likely to look up the meaning of English words they do not understand than to continue reading without clarification. This result indicates that respondents prioritize comprehension and are willing to take an extra step to ensure thorough understanding of the text.

The analysis also highlights the need to examine the frequency and extent to which respondents look up new words. While the survey data do not provide specific information on these aspects, further research could shed light on the frequency of looking up words and the depth of their willingness to explore new words for text comprehension. Overall, the results suggest that respondents use a combination of strategies, including guessing and looking up unknown words, to improve their comprehension of English texts. This indicates a proactive approach to language learning and a willingness to use available resources for comprehension. Further research is needed to explore respondents' specific patterns and preferences regarding the frequency and extent of word lookup.

Discussion and Conclusion

Table 2 shows the compensation strategies from mostly preferred to the least preferred by the target respondents among diploma students of a Malaysian public university. The results of this study provide valuable insights into the compensatory strategies that Malaysian graduate students use when learning English. The preference for using a word or phrase that means the same thing and for gestures during conversation is consistent with previous studies on compensation strategies (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Oxford, 1990). The use of guessing to understand unfamiliar words and to predict what the other person will say next also supports previous research (Kuo & Anderson, 2010; Liao & Fukuya, 2004).

Table 2: Compensation Strategies Preferred by Target Respondents

No.	Mean	Items
vi	5.59	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.
ii	5.25	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
i	5.14	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.
v	4.70	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.
iii	4.30	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.
iv	3.72	I read English without looking up every new word.

On the other hand, the limited use of inventing new words is consistent with the findings of other studies indicating that this strategy is not commonly used by language learners (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Oxford, 1990). However, the dissatisfaction with reading English without looking up each new word is somewhat surprising, as previous studies have found that learners often rely on contextual clues to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. Although the current study did not provide information on specific language dimensions, it is noteworthy that items (ii) 'When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures' and (v) 'I try to guess what the other person will say next in English' relate specifically to the Speaking dimension, while item (iv) 'I read English without looking up every new word' relates to the Reading dimension. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that different compensatory strategies are used for different language skills (Oxford, 1990). Future studies could investigate this aspect in more detail.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the compensatory strategies used by Malaysian graduate students in learning English and highlight areas for

further research. Future studies could investigate the relationship between the use of compensatory strategies and language proficiency, as well as the effectiveness of these strategies in facilitating language learning. The study of Malaysian graduate students' compensatory strategies may indeed shed light on the impact of sociocultural factors on language learning. However, a more detailed study using a qualitative approach is needed to uncover the nuanced complexity and contextual factors associated with Malaysian graduate students' use of compensatory strategies.

Qualitative research methods, such as interviews, observations, and analysis of language learning experiences, can provide rich and in-depth insights into students' motivations, perceptions, and decision-making processes when using compensatory strategies. Moreover, a qualitative study can explore the effectiveness and appropriateness of various compensatory strategies used by Malaysian college students. By analyzing students' experiences and reflections, researchers can identify the strategies that have proven successful in certain contexts, as well as those that may need further refinement or adaptation.

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