

Language Learning Strategy Use across Gender

Penggunaan Strategi Belajar Bahasa oleh Pembelajar Laki-laki dan Perempuan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of gender on Indonesian EFL tertiary students' use of learning strategies for speaking skills. It addresses what learning strategies the students use, what strategy and strategy group they favour, and whether gender significantly affects the strategy use. This paper reports the quantitative part of a larger mixed method study which draws on questionnaire (N= 65) obtained at Gajayana University of Malang. The study demonstrates that the students used a wide range of strategies that spread over six strategy groups. Male students favored the strategy 'finding out about language learning' and the strategy group of 'compensation'. Female students favored the strategy 'paying attention' and the strategy group of 'metacognitive'. The study also shows that gender significantly affected the use of 'affective' strategies only. The paper concludes by discussing implications for theory and practice.

Keywords: *language learning strategies, speaking skills, learning strategies for speaking, gender*

INTISARI

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji pengaruh jenis kelamin terhadap penggunaan strategi belajar berbicara Bahasa Inggris di kalangan mahasiswa Program Studi Bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Fokus penelitiannya mencakup strategi belajar apa saja yang digunakan; strategi dan kelompok strategi apa yang disukai; dan apakah jenis kelamin memiliki pengaruh signifikan terhadap penggunaan strategi belajar. Paper ini merupakan laporan hasil penelitian khusus bagian kuantitatif dari sebuah penelitian mixed-method yang datanya dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner (N = 65) di Universitas Gajayana Malang. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa peserta penelitian menggunakan sejumlah strategi belajar yang tersebar dalam enam kelompok. Peserta berjenis kelamin laki-laki menyukai strategi belajar 'finding out about language learning – mencari tahu tentang pembelajaran bahasa', dan kelompok strategi 'compensation – kompensasi'. Peserta berjenis kelamin perempuan menyukai strategi belajar 'paying attention – memperhatikan', dan kelompok strategi 'metacognitive – metakognitif'. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa jenis kelamin memiliki pengaruh signifikan hanya terhadap kelompok strategi 'affective – afektif. Paper ini ditutup dengan penjelasan implikasi teori dan praktek.

Kata kunci: strategi belajar bahasa, keterampilan berbicara, strategi belajar untuk keterampilan berbicara, jenis kelamin

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that some learners perform better than others in learning a second language. This shows that individual learner variables affect learning outcomes. Identification and classification of these learner variables have been done (for example, [Altman, 1980](#); [Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991](#); [Skehan, 1989](#)). These researchers state that learning strategies are among the learner variables that influence learning outcomes. Because strategies have an effect on language learning outcomes and they can be learnt, research into this matter is very useful.

This study explores the strategy use of Indonesian EFL tertiary students for speaking skills. This paper reports on the quantitative part of a larger mixed method study, drawing on questionnaire (N = 65) obtained from students at Gajayana University of Malang (GUM), in an effort to understand what strategies they use, what strategy and strategy group they favour, and whether gender significantly affect strategy use.

Learning strategies have been defined in slightly different ways. The definition proposed by [Griffiths \(2008\)](#), however, best suits this study. They are described as “activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning” ([Griffiths, 2008: 87](#)). As regards classification of the strategies, [Oxford’s](#) well-known learning strategy taxonomy ([1990](#)) lists 62 different strategies and distinguishes between direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are those that directly involve the target language. They require mental processing of the language. Indirect strategies are those that support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language. The first major class, direct strategies, is divided into three sub-classes called memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies are subdivided into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. [Oxford \(1990\)](#) further claims that 46 out of 62 strategies from her whole strategy taxonomy are useful for the learning of speaking. The strategies are summarized in Table 1.

At the early stage of research on language learning strategies in relation to certain learner factors, in the late 1980s, gender attracted researchers because of its possible influence on strategy use. At that stage, there had been little research on the gender question. However, [Oxford & Nyikos \(1989: 294\)](#) pointed out that “sex had a profound effect on strategy choice”. This implies a simple, straightforward relation between language learning strategies and gender. Over time, the research took gender more and more seriously. However, it offered conflicting findings: female students’ strategy use surpassing male students’, male students’ strategy use surpassing female students’, and no or a less clear distinction between male and female students’ strategy use.

Most studies reveal female students’ strategy use surpassing male students’ in terms of quantity, frequency, and quality. With respect to the quantity, either from the point of view of the overall strategy use, specific strategy groups, or specific individual strategies, studies demonstrate that female students use or tend to use more strategies than male students do ([Catalán, 2003](#); [Lan & Oxford, 2003](#); [Liu, 2004](#); [Nguyen, 2008](#)). Concerning the frequency of use, studies show that female students use strategies more often than male students do ([Dreyer & Oxford, 1996](#); [Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006](#); [Lan & Oxford, 2003](#)). As regards the quality of use, studies reveal better strategy use of female than of male students (for example, [Green & Oxford, 1995](#)). Studies demonstrate indeed various findings on the relationship between learning strategies and gender, favouring female students. Some reveal significant differences in the overall strategy use ([Lan & Oxford, 2003](#); [Liu, 2004](#)); in each of the strategy groups ([Green & Oxford, 1995](#)); and in specific individual strategies ([Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006](#)). [Hong-Nam & Leavell \(2006\)](#), for instance, show that significant differences between male and female students lay only in the use of affective strategies.

Table 1 Learning strategies useful for speaking skills

Item	Strategy	Group	Class		
1	Placing new words into a context	Memory	Direct		
2	Representing sounds in memory				
3	Structured reviewing				
4	Repeating	Cognitive	Direct		
5	Formally practising with sounds and writing systems				
6	Recognizing and using formulas and patterns				
7	Recombining				
8	Practising naturalistically				
9	Using resources for receiving and sending messages				
10	Reasoning deductively				
11	Translating				
12	Transferring				
13	Switching to the mother tongue			Compensation	Direct
14	Getting help				
15	Using mime or gesture				
16	Avoiding communication partially or totally				
17	Selecting the topic				
18	Adjusting or approximating the message				
19	Coining words				
20	Using a circumlocution or synonym				
21	Overviewing and linking with already known material	Metacognitive	Indirect		
22	Paying attention				
23	Delaying speech production to focus on listening				
24	Finding out about language learning				
25	Organizing				
26	Setting goals and objectives				
27	Identifying the purpose of a language task				
28	Planning for a language task				
29	Seeking practice opportunities				
30	Self-monitoring				
31	Self-evaluating				
32	Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation	Affective	Indirect		
33	Using music				
34	Using laughter				
35	Making positive statements				
36	Taking risks wisely				
37	Rewarding yourself				
38	Listening to your body				
39	Using a checklist				
40	Writing a language learning diary				
41	Discussing your feelings with someone else				
42	Asking for correction			Social	Indirect
43	Cooperating with peers				
44	Cooperating with proficient users of the new language				
45	Developing cultural understanding				
46	Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings				

(Source: research data)

A couple of studies give evidence of male students' strategy use surpassing female students'. Wharton (2000), for example, demonstrates that male students significantly differed from female students in their strategy use. Male students significantly used more strategies more often than female students did. Similarly, Radwan (2011) reveals differences between male students and female students in their strategy use. Unlike Wharton (2000), however, he demonstrates that the significant differences lay only in the use of 'social' strategies. The general tendency, however, still showed that male students used more strategies than female students. Green & Oxford (1995) also discover one cognitive strategy from the Strategy

Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), i.e., ‘watching TV or movies in English’, that was used more often by male than by female students. In general, however, female students did surpass male students, in their use of 14 of 15 strategies from the SILL, showing differences between genders.

Other studies reveal no or a less clear distinction between male and female students’ strategy use. [Dadour & Robbins \(1996\)](#) demonstrate that there was no difference between male and female students in strategy use. Both sexes used an array of language learning strategies to help them develop their skills. [Ehrman & Oxford \(1990\)](#) also discover no significant differences between genders in terms of strategy use. [Riazi & Khodadadi \(2007\)](#) in a study of the effect of gender on the use of communication strategies among Iranian EFL tertiary students find that female students showed a greater interest in using strategies, but no statistical significance was observed between male and female students in their strategy use. Kaylani (1996 cited in [Lee and Oxford, 2008](#)) discovers differences between male and female students in terms of strategy use, but the differences were not caused only by gender, but gender in relation to proficiency. Therefore, a less clear distinction between them was apparent.

Commenting on his research finding, i.e., male students significantly used more social strategies than female students did, that contradicts findings of other research studies (for example, [Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006](#); [Radwan, 2011](#)) argues that students’ cultural background contributes to the occurrence of this finding, which he gained from a study of adult Omani learners. He states that the Omani tribal system, requiring interactions among large extended kin groups, requires men to develop extremely good social skills to operate in the context. This might have influenced the men in their L2 learning. Additionally, the conservative nature of culture, customs, and habits prevents females in Arab regions from socializing and establishing relationships outside their immediate circles. [Kobayashi \(2002\)](#) addresses a similar issue, i.e., Japanese female students’ superiority in attitudes to English over fellow Japanese male counterparts, by pointing to local social factors as the reasons. Such social factors include the status of English as feminised academic and professional choices and women’s marginalised status in the local society.

In line with [Radwan \(2011\)](#) and [Kobayashi \(2002\)](#), I agree that students’ sociocultural background and learning environment are credible reasons why research studies on L2 learning strategies in relation to gender demonstrate conflicting findings. They are empirical studies that reflect various sociocultural backgrounds, learning environments, and contexts. Therefore, while accepting them as the theoretical foundation for the investigation of the problem posed in this study, I view those with extremely different sociocultural backgrounds from this study as general models only. Those having a very similar sociocultural background to this study, which is Asian culture, are treated as prominent references. They include those of [Lan & Oxford \(2003\)](#), [Liu \(2004\)](#), and [Wharton \(2000\)](#). The latter are also relevant to the interpretation of findings of this study. Because of the conflicting findings in the literature, it is hoped that this research will contribute to resolving the conflicts.

METHODOLOGY

This study report draws on the quantitative part of a larger mixed method study. I employed a questionnaire which was adapted from the SILL version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) ([Oxford, 1990](#)), and used a five-point Likert-scale to probe how true the statements about learning strategy use were to the students. Thirty-three statements were adopted from the SILL and six were original. To collect the data on students’ gender, I used the students’ information about sex provided in the questionnaire.

Participants of this study (N = 65) were EFL English majors at GUM from year 1 to 5. This represents 60% of all students at the Department of English Language and Literature (DELL). The students were between 18 and 25 years old and had studied English at school for

at least six years prior tertiary entry. They had never received explicit overt strategy training. There were 38 male and 27 female students.

To analyse the data, I first used descriptive statistics, focusing on the mean, standard deviation, and range. The mean score obtained from the entire questionnaire items, for example, would indicate the students' overall strategy use. Other mean scores, depending on the focus of the examination, indicated the strategy use of specific groups of students, i.e., groups of students in terms of gender. Mean scores also indicated what strategy and strategy group the students favored the most and least, in the sense that, based on a certain ranking, the highest mean score indicated the most favored strategy or strategy group, and the lowest mean score indicated the least favored. Second, I used inferential statistical analysis to answer whether gender significantly affected strategy use, in particular the Independent Samples Test. This could help determine whether or not there was a significant difference in strategy use among the two groups of students based on gender. The choice of the Independent Samples Test was guided by the need to compare the mean scores among the two independent groups (Pallant, 2007).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

With regard to the question of what strategies the students use, the results of data analysis demonstrate that female and male students used a wide range of strategies spreading over the six strategy groups (Oxford, 1990). Table 2 shows the strategies, strategy groups, and mean scores for each that were employed by the students.

Table 2 Learning strategies for speaking used by male and female students (N = 65)

Strategy groups	Item	Learning strategies	Mean	
			Male N=38	Female N=27
Memory Male: 2.64	1	Placing new words into a context	2.71	2.59
	2	Representing sounds in memory	2.13	2.14
Female: 2.56	3	Structured reviewing	3.07	2.96
	4&5	Repeating	2.94	3.14
Cognitive Male: 2.93	6	Formally practising with sound system	2.92	3.40
	7	Recombining	2.65	2.55
Female: 3.12	8	Practising naturalistically	2.47	2.62
	9	Using resources for receiving and sending messages	3.47	3.66
	10	Recognizing and using formulas and patterns	2.97	2.96
		Reasoning deductively	2.97	2.96
	11	Translating	3.07	3.51
		Transferring	3.07	3.51
Compensation Male: 3.31	12	Using mime or gesture	3.57	3.59
	13	Coining word	3.15	3.25
Female: 3.45	14	Using a circumlocution or synonym	3.50	3.74
	15	Switching to the mother tongue	3.84	3.66
	16	Getting help	3.26	3.70
	17	Avoiding communication partially or totally	2.78	2.85
	18	Selecting the topic	2.97	3.22
	19	Adjusting or approximating the message	3.42	3.62
Metacognitive Male: 3.28	20	Overviewing and linking with already known material	3.31	3.59
	21	Paying attention	3.86	4.22
Female: 3.55	22	Delaying speech production to focus on listening	3.05	3.55
	23	Finding out about language learning	3.89	4.03
	24	Organizing	2.65	2.96
	25&26	Seeking practice opportunities	3.03	3.22
	27	Setting goals and objectives	3.21	3.40
		Identifying the purpose of a language task	3.21	3.40
		Planning for a language task	3.21	3.40
	28	Self-monitoring	3.23	3.74
	29	Self-evaluating	3.55	3.62

Affective Male: 2.85 Female: 3.19	30	Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation	3.55	3.70
		Using music	3.55	3.70
		Using laughter	3.55	3.70
	31	Making positive statement	3.26	3.62
		Taking risk wisely	3.26	3.62
	32	Rewarding yourself	2.39	2.77
33	Listening to your body	3.28	3.40	
	Using a checklist	3.28	3.40	
34	Writing a language learning diary	1.92	2.37	
	35	Discussing your feelings with someone else	2.68	3.25
Social Male: 2.86 Female: 3.01	36	Asking for correction	2.47	2.85
	37	Cooperating with peers	3.15	3.37
	38	Cooperating with proficient users of the new language	2.78	2.55
	39	Developing cultural understanding	3.02	3.29
		Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings	3.06	3.29
Total: 6	39	46	3.06	3.26

As Table 3 shows, descriptive statistics of the students' responses to the entire items in the questionnaire show that the mean score for male students' overall strategy use is 3.06, and female students' 3.26. These mean scores indicate that the overall strategy use of both groups is medium.

Table 3 Comparison of mean scores for male and female students' overall strategy use (N = 65)

Gender	Strategy use		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Male students (N = 38)	3.06	.46	2.41
Female students (N = 27)	3.26	.34	1.62

In line with the above-mentioned finding – both groups used all the strategies in roughly similar way – the distinction between them can be indicated by pinpointing which strategy they favored. The rationale for this is that their strategy preference is believed to be influenced by, among others, their nature as male or female learners. In addition, cultural values stereotypically associated to each gender play an important role in the choice of strategies learners use to facilitate their language learning.

Regarding the question of what strategies the students prefer, male and female students showed differences. As seen in Table 4 below, male and female students favored different strategies the most as indicated by the mean scores of the strategies. 'Finding out about language learning' has the highest mean, 3.89, among male students, and 'paying attention' is the strategy with the highest mean, 4.22, which was used by female students. Since these strategies have the highest mean scores, they were the strategies that male and female students favored the most.

Table 4 Learning strategies for speaking with the highest mean score used by male and female students (N = 65)

Gender	Item	Learning strategy	Mean	SD	Range
Male	23	Finding out about language learning	3.89	.98	4.00
Female	21	Paying attention	4.22	.93	3.00

At the other end of the scale, strategies have the lowest mean scores. As Table 5 shows, 'writing a language learning diary' has the lowest mean, 1.92, and was used by male students, and 'representing sounds in memory' has the lowest mean, 2.14, among female students. With

their lowest mean score, they were the strategies that male and female students favored the least.

Table 5 Learning strategies with the lowest mean score used by male and female students (N = 65)

Gender	Item	Learning strategy	Mean	SD	Range
Male	34	Writing a language learning diary	1.92	.99	4.00
Female	2	Representing sounds in memory	2.14	1.13	3.00

The findings on what strategies the students favour can be discussed this way: it may be said that ‘finding out about language learning’ is a strategy that implies, among other things, ‘dynamicity’ in the sense that users of this strategy show initiative and actively search for information useful for their learning. In contrast, ‘paying attention’ implies a characteristic which is ‘static’ in the sense that users of this strategy are passive, subservient, and compliant. Consequently, they do not show any initiative. Based on the characteristic of these two strategies, it may not be a surprise that Indonesian male students favored ‘finding out about language learning’ and their female counterparts’ favored ‘paying attention’. The Indonesian tradition, in particular of Javanese, values males more than females. Such a tradition requires males to play a leading role in every walk of life, a role requiring dynamicity, activeness, and power. On the other hand, the tradition requires females to be passive and compliant. This tradition has perhaps influenced the students’ strategy use.

Concerning what strategy groups the students favour, mean scores in Table 6 indicate that male and female students favored the most and least. Male students favored the ‘compensation’ strategy group the most, and female students the ‘metacognitive’ strategy group, as indicated by the highest mean score the groups have: 3.31 and 3.55 respectively. At the other end of the scale, both groups of students favored the ‘memory’ strategy group the least, with the mean score of 2.64 for male students and 2.56 for female students.

Table 6 Ranking of mean scores for strategy groups used by male and female students (N = 65)

Ranking	Gender	Strategy groups	Mean	SD	Range
1	Male	Compensation	3.31	.57	3.38
	Female	Metacognitive	3.55	.49	2.00
2	Male	Metacognitive	3.28	.62	2.70
	Female	Compensation	3.45	.53	2.00
3	Male	Cognitive	2.93	.46	2.38
	Female	Affective	3.19	.51	2.17
4	Male	Social	2.86	.76	3.25
	Female	Cognitive	3.12	.54	2.38
5	Male	Affective	2.85	.61	2.33
	Female	Social	3.01	.61	2.50
6	Male	Memory	2.64	.64	2.67
	Female	Memory	2.56	.59	2.67

To examine whether or not gender significantly affected strategy use, the Independent Samples Test was used. The results of the test displayed in Table 7 show that the t value is -1.896 ($p = .063$). The p value indicates that the null hypothesis, i.e., there is no difference between male and female students in strategy use, is not rejected. In other words, gender did not significantly affect strategy use.

Table 7 Independent Samples Test results for the relationship between the students' overall strategy use and gender (N = 65)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.552	.217	-1.896	63	.063	-.20205	.10655	-.41498	.01087
Equal variances not assumed			-1.992	62.835	.051	-.20205	.10141	-.40472	.00061

Although gender did not significantly affect the students' overall strategy use, at the level of the use of each of the six strategy groups, it significantly affected the use of 'affective' strategies. As seen in Table 8 below, the t value is -2.341 (p = .022). The p value indicates that, statistically, male and female students differed significantly in using affective strategies.

Table 8 Independent Samples Test results for the significant relationship between the affective strategy group and gender (N = 65)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.876	.353	-2.341	63	.022	-.34048	.14541	-.63107	-.04989
Equal variances not assumed			-2.414	61.246	.019	-.34048	.14106	-.62252	-.05844

Gender did not significantly affect the use of the other strategy groups. The t value for the memory strategy group is .462 (p = .646), the cognitive strategy group -1.557 (p = .124), the compensation strategy group -1.016 (p = .314), the metacognitive strategy group -1.872 (p = .066), and the social strategy group -.876 (p = .384). These p values indicate that the null hypothesis stating that there is no difference between male and female students in using memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies is not rejected.

The rationale behind the last two findings is that statistically, gender significantly affected the use of 'affective' strategies only (p = .022), but on a larger scale, it did not significantly affect the students' overall strategy use (p = .063). This finding parallels a finding from a study by [Hong-Nam & Leavell \(2006\)](#) who demonstrate that significant differences between male and female students lay only in the use of affective strategies. In discussing this particular finding of theirs, [Hong-Nam & Leavell \(2006\)](#) argue that women tend to build relationships and use social network with greater consistency than men. Consequently, the use

of affective strategies indicating the use of emotional support systems in the context of language learning is not unexpected. This could be true for Indonesian context. In the present study, the use of affective strategies among female students is indicated by a higher mean score, 3.19, than that among male students, i.e., 2.85. Additionally, female Indonesians who are stereotypically viewed as being more emotional than their male counterparts might have contributed to the higher use of affective strategies among them.

As regards the finding that shows no statistically significant relationship between the students' overall strategy use and gender, arguably the relationship between the two variables is positive. The reason is that the p value, .063, is only slightly above the significance value chosen for this study, .05. If the significance value had been set at .10, which is fully acceptable in social science research, the result would have been significant. One social factor of the learning environment may be responsible for this relationship. Referring to [Kobayashi \(2002\)](#) who demonstrates the influence of social elements towards English learning attitude of students in Japan, one may see a similar phenomenon in this study. Like Japanese female students, Indonesian female students demonstrated superior language learning strategy use over male students. As [Kobayashi \(2002\)](#) points out, the feminization of English is one of the reasons why Japanese female students' attitude towards English is more positive than that of their male counterparts.

CONCLUSION

With reference to the research question of what strategies the students use, this study demonstrates the use of strategies at a total number of 46 strategies. Out of these 46 strategies, 'finding out about language learning' is the strategy favored the most by male students, and 'paying attention' is that of female students. 'Writing a language learning diary' is the strategy favored the least by male students, and 'Representing sounds in memory' is the one by female students. Concerning strategy groups, male students favored 'compensation' strategies the most whereas female students, 'metacognitive' ones. Both groups favored 'memory' strategies the least.

With reference to whether gender significantly affects strategy use, this study indicates that gender significantly affected the use of 'affective' strategies only as shown by the t value is -2.341 ($p = .022$).

The findings of this study lead to implications to theory and practice. For the first implication, this study contributes to theories on learning strategies regarding knowledge of the relationship between gender and language learning strategies for speaking skills. With respect to practice, the implications of this study would be for teachers, curriculum developers, and students. For teachers, this study contributes knowledge about the use of learning strategies for speaking skills among students at DELL. This knowledge would raise their awareness for the needs to provide an organised, well informed strategy training that assists students to use the strategies for their maximum learning outcomes. For curriculum developers at GUM, this study contributes a basis for developing a curriculum that accommodates the need for the strategy training mentioned above. For students, this study contributes an opportunity for strategy use development, in the sense that as the implications for teachers and curriculum developers are put into practice, students will benefit from a proper program of strategy training. It is undeniably true that the implications of this study apply not only to teachers, curriculum developers, and students at GUM but also to those at other universities in Indonesia, provided that those universities share common features with GUM.

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