

French Language Learning Strategies among Beginner-Level Learners of a Public University in Central Peninsula Malaysia During Covid-19

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the students' language learning strategies in learning French throughout the new learning norm due to COVID-19. A total number of 203 beginner learners from 9 different classes participated in this study. All classes were held online as part of the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to curb the spread of COVID-19. Oxford's (1990) SILL questionnaire (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) version 7.0 was distributed online via Google Forms to observe learners' language learning strategies. The acquired data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software and then classified to a certain level of SILL Profile. The result revealed that the Metacognitive Strategies are students' most frequently employed language learning strategies, with a mean score of 3.76. (classified as High level). Subsequently, with a mean score of 3.20, the students' least often used strategy is Compensation Strategies (classified as Medium level). Hopefully, this research will assist learners in learning French in different learning settings.

The results of this study show that respondents supervise and plan their learning very well because they had prior experience learning Malay, English, and Arabic. Conversely, respondents lack the mastery to guess the meaning of words from context and struggle to perceive non-verbal communication to understand certain words or explanations because the online teaching and learning platform limits their eye contact during classes. Hopefully, students can improve their French language learning by incorporating more language learning strategies to make online learning more efficient.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, French Language, Covid-19, Online Learning, Multilingualism

Introduction

Coronavirus, known as COVID-19, is a global health threat (Pshenichnaya et al., 2020). According to UNESCO, COVID-19 has impacted Malaysia and the worldwide education sectors. The pandemic has caused drastic changes in Malaysia's learning environment,

including universities (Thandavaraj et al., 2021). French is typically taught in the classroom in a formal education system, with both teachers and students present. However, COVID-19 has made online learning mandatory. Online learning has been used for many years and is not a new notion in education (Kohnke et al., 2022). Nevertheless, this new normal altered the method of instruction to keep learners engaged.

This transition introduces new challenges in (a) course planning, which necessitates the development of new materials and assessments, and (b) access to digital devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones. (c) students' connectivity access, (d) students' engagement and participation (e) teachers' training so that all new teaching resources can be used effectively (Demuyakor, 2020; Murphy et al., 2020; Toquero, 2020). Lin et al (2017) assert that language learning is the most challenging online course. Language learners typically require active participation in verbal and nonverbal language activities, which is usually limited when learning a language online. They also claim that online language learners appear to use learning strategies actively and that encouraging the use of learning strategies can effectively improve students' language acquisition. Students benefit from the flexibility and comfort that online language learning offers. However, it is considered less effective when students are not autonomous because lecturers intervene less in online classes than physical courses (Kohnke et al., 2022). Lack of autonomy and language skills in online classrooms can cause psychological distance, unhappiness, and failure, especially in individuals not used to learning online because language learning strategies are the most critical parts of the language learning process (Thandavaraj et al., 2021).

Language learning no longer merely entails amassing knowledge about the language; it also implies that the learners are regarded as active and provided with 'strategies' that help them nourish their knowledge and overcome communication difficulties in a foreign language (Camară, 2019). According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies (LLS) are specific measures made by learners to make learning easier, faster, more engaging, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to various settings.

All language learners use various LLS to attain their objectives, but what distinguishes them is the frequency and type of LLS employed (Chamot and Kupper, 1989). This claim demonstrates that competent language learners may efficiently use various combinations of LLS forms dependent on their learning needs (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

Oxford (1990) categorises strategies into six groups, the first three of which are direct and the last three of which are indirect: Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social. She added that this ranking is understandable despite the difficulty of classifying strategies. Direct strategies, such as Memory Strategies, require mental processing of the language and assist the learner in storing and retrieving new information. Compensation Strategies (Communication Strategies) allow the learner to use the new language for comprehension or production despite knowledge gaps. Cognitive Strategies involve manipulating or transforming the target language through analysis, repetition, and synthesis. Indirect strategies aid and manage language learning without directly affecting the target language. Metacognitive Strategies help the learner control his cognition, i.e., organise his learning processes. Affective Strategies assist in regulating learners' moods to motivate them to learn the language. Finally, Social Strategies help students learn with others by allowing them to control their emotions, motivations, and attitudes.

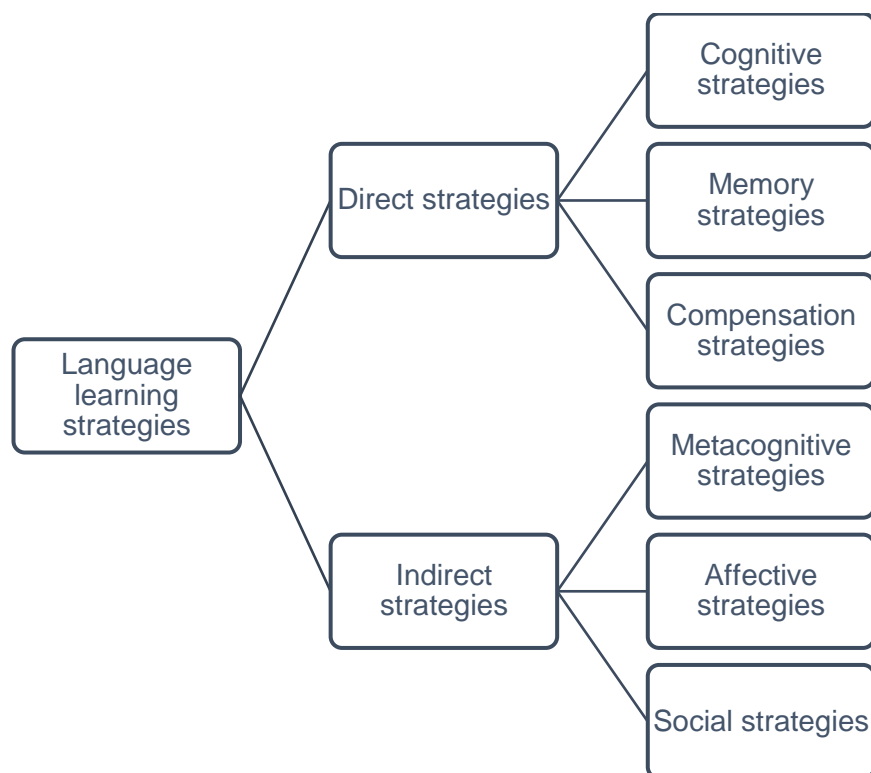


Diagram 1
Direct and Indirect Strategies (Oxford, 1990)

Ranjan and Philominraj (2020) suggested in many face-to-face language learning settings; students were reported to have a high-level use of both social and metacognitive strategies, while the rest of strategy are reported as medium-level use. The same result was found by Lestari and Wahyudin (2020) with the high use of metacognitive, social, and compensation strategies and medium use of cognitive, memory, and affective strategies. And in another case, high level of use for all LLS (Lestari & Fatimah, 2020). These findings can be interpreted as a pattern in higher education suggesting that students tend to be both medium and high LLS users during face-to-face settings. The most preferred LLS is Metacognitive.

Several studies have investigated the differences in LLS usage among students in face-to-face and online settings. In his studies, Walter (2021) found no significant difference between LLS used in face-to-face and digital settings. He also discovered that the online groups, like their face-to-face counterparts, strongly prefer metacognitive strategies. As a result, it appears that online learners prefer metacognitive strategies over others, and they do not need to be explicitly taught these strategies to use them. Meanwhile, in another comparative study by Irgatolu et al (2022), there is a decrease in the use of Direct Strategies; Memory, Cognitive, and Compensation. However, they reported that learners used Indirect Strategies such as Metacognitive, Affective, and Social more frequently during the pandemic. Both studies, however, were conducted on a sample of 50 English learners. The sample size was insufficient for general prediction if done with a larger group and in French language classes. Because we only recently recovered from the pandemic, there are few comparative studies on LLS during the COVID-19 restrictions and non-restriction settings.

Concerning LLS and multilingualism, Frestman (2021) concludes that learners' L3 acquisition is influenced by their knowledge of multiple languages. Ranjan & Philominraj

(2020) state that each learner has a preferred learning technique or strategies that they believe are appropriate for them, which may be due to differences in their background, environment, goals, and motivations. The interaction of all languages in the multilingual system boosted language awareness, assisting bi- and multilingual speakers in acquiring a new language.

When studying a foreign language, in this case, French, students use a variety of strategies based on their experience learning other languages such as Malay, English, and Arabic.

The study of LLS on French language students at a public university in the central peninsula of Malaysia during the pandemic will allow for more self-directed learning for multilingual individuals to learn French during this specific period. This self-learning is vital because teachers are not always present to guide learners (Carter et al., 2020). Although it does not describe the entire method of learning and teaching French at Malaysian higher education institutes, the findings of this study can be used as a reference for French instructors if situations such as COVID-19 occur again. Previous studies primarily focused on Language Learning Strategies and English proficiency in face-to-face higher education settings (Alhaysony, 2017; Taheri et al., 2020). This study will hopefully lead to more research on French language learning in Malaysia. Moreover, this research can help to improve French learning and teaching methods for multilingual Malaysian students.

Hence, in light of the preceding discussion, this study aims to describe the students' language learning strategies in learning French throughout the new learning norm due to COVID-19. Using the data, we were able to investigate the level of LLS use among students during COVID-19. In addition, we will explore the impact of online learning on their LLS.

Methodology

This descriptive research uses a quantitative method. According to Atmowardoyo (2018), descriptive research is defined as a research method that is used to characterise existing phenomena accurately. He added that the term "existing phenomenon" distinguishes descriptive research from experiment research, which observes not only existing phenomena but also phenomena following a specific treatment period. This study attempted to describe learners' learning strategies and determine whether students' prior language knowledge influences their choice of learning strategies during the pandemic.

This study used a questionnaire to collect information on French learners' LLS. The research instrument was adapted from the SILL questionnaire (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) version 7.0 by Oxford (1990), consisting of 50 items and a few demography questions. The timeline to complete the questionnaire is around 60 minutes. An education and language specialist from a local university validated this questionnaire.

A. Participants

This research involved 203 French language students at the beginner level from the 2020/2021 academic year. Because of the large population of 270 students from 9 classes, the random sampling technique is used. This survey included 20-25 students from each class. Table 1 shows the demographics of the students involved in the study.

Table I

Demographic characteristics of French for beginners (level 1) students.

GENDER	N	%	Malay As The First Language	MUET Band Three Above	SPM Credited Advanced Arabic
MALE	97	48%	100%	100%	100%
FEMALE	106	52%	100%	100%	100%
TOTAL	203	100%	100%	100%	100%

As shown in Table 1, 48 per cent of the sample's participants are males, while 52 per cent are females. They speak Malay as their first language, have at least a band three on the Malaysia University English Test (MUET), and have advanced Arabic credits on their Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM). These students chose French as an elective subject during COVID-19, semester A212 2021/2022.

B. Methods and Data Collection

Students volunteered to take part in this study. The questionnaire was sent to their Telegram group as a Google Form, and they were given a week to complete it with a time limit of two hours. The purpose of the data collection was explained to the students during the last synchronous online class. The data collection and handling were declared strictly per Universiti Putra Malaysia's accepted research ethics norms.

C. SILL Questionnaire

An adapted version of Oxford's language learning strategy (SILL) scale with 50 items was used to assess the students' use of LLS. It is divided into two main categories and six subcategories to analyse language learning strategies. The major categories are divided into two classes: 'direct strategies' and 'indirect strategies'; subcategories of direct strategies are memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, and indirect strategies are metacognitive, affective, and social. This 5-point Likert scale ranges from 'never correct' to 'always correct'. After administering the questionnaire, the researcher must determine the level of those strategies by analysing the mean of each language learning strategy. The data was analysed using the SPSS 26 programme. Finally, the descriptive analysis of students' average language learning strategies was classified into some levels based on the SILL Profile of Result (Oxford, 1989).

Table II

SILL Profile of Result (Oxford, 1989)

High	Always or almost always used	4.5 to 5.0
	Usually used	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5 to 3.4
Low	Generally not used	1.5 to 2.4
	Never or rarely used	1.0 to 1.4

I. Overall Findings and Discussion

This research data was collected using an adapted SILL questionnaire (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) version 7.0 by Oxford (1989) that is specialised for second

or foreign-language learners to examine the language learning strategies applied. In the research of language learning strategies used by French language learners, the researcher needed to use the adapted version of the SILL questionnaire. The mean of each strategy and the categorisation according to the SILL Profile of result is shown in Table II.

Table III

The Rank order of students' Language Learning Strategies

No	The Strategies	Mean Scores	Level
1	Metacognitive Strategies	3.76	High
2	Memory Strategies	3.72	High
3	Cognitive Strategies	3.42	High
4	Affective Strategies	3.40	High
5	Social Strategies	3.29	Medium
6	Compensation Strategies	3.20	Medium

According to the data, the mean for all strategies used by level 1 French language students is high (3.47). The data shows that students used all strategies during the pandemic to learn French. Metacognitive Strategies ($x = 3.76$) were the most frequently used, followed by Memory Strategies ($x = 3.72$), Cognitive Strategies ($x = 3.42$), and Affective Strategies ($x = 3.40$). However, the data gathered also show that the Social Strategies ($x = 3.29$) and Compensation Strategies ($x = 3.20$) were the least frequently used.

This study found that the level of LLS used during the pandemic was high. The use of Metacognitive Strategies was at the highest level. The result is in line with studies done by (Alhaysony, 2017; Ranjan & Philominraj, 2020; Lestari & Wahyudin, 2020; Lestari & Fatimah, 2020). However, this result does not concur with Liu (2015), which indicated that Compensation Strategies were the most frequently used LLS.

Compared with other studies by Walter (2021); Irgatolu et al (2022), during the pandemic, there is also not much difference in LLS preference, with Metacognitive Strategies remaining the most preferred strategies. This study, however, shows that the Compensation Strategies is the least preferred LLS used by the students with moderate level use compared to the mentioned studies with high-level use. It is also interesting to note that the data shows that the use of Direct Strategies like Memory and Cognitive is at a high level, while the study by Irgatolu et al (2022) indicates that there was a decrease in the use of Direct Strategies; Memory, Cognitive, and Compensation during the same period.

It can be said that the learning environment, both face-to-face and online learning, and learners' linguistic profiles, determine the use of LLS while learning French. The result of this study could represent their way of learning during the pandemic. Since the result showed the highest use of Metacognitive Strategies, it demonstrates how they constructed their learning style by planning and supervising their learning process. According to Frestman (2021), this learning consciousness stems from their prior experience learning other languages.

These findings answer the research question describing the students' language learning strategies in learning French throughout the new learning norm due to COVID-19.

Conclusions

This study indicates that after the sudden outbreak of COVID-19, online learning was implemented to keep the learners involved in the learning process. Language learning strategies are essential for learning a second or foreign language. Appropriate teaching and learning strategies in the classroom are required for successful language learning. Learners also need language learning strategies to improve and regulate their learning and assess their learning autonomy. Online learning offers students an outstanding opportunity to find online resources in French language learning. Websites, interactive games, podcasts, social media, and digital materials are used to access learning opportunities. As a result, online learning can be considered an opportunity that results from these facilities.

The language profile of the learner also influences their choice of LLS. All respondents in this study speak Malay as their first language, and English and Arabic are also a requirement to further their studies at this university. These students know at least three languages before taking French as an elective. Previous research has shown that knowing more than one language contributes to more significant intellectual development and makes learning another language easier (Wrembel et al., 2020). The findings show that Direct Strategies, such as Cognitive, was used second most frequently after Metacognitive Strategies. These experienced language learners understand how to reason, convey ideas, summarise, and select the main idea. Students are free to make their own choices in the learning process because the curriculum during the pandemic allows them to consider their way rather than restrict them.

On the other hand, students used mostly metacognitive strategies during the pandemic because they needed to figure out their learning process as the teacher was only present during the synchronous session. That also explains why the Compensation Strategies were the least preferred. They had little chance for French interaction and had to focus on the slides rather than the instructor's facial gestures or movements. Compensation Strategies require students to find synonyms from the context of the reading and rely on non-verbal communication, such as gestures, to convey a meaning when they do not understand the exact meaning of a statement (Oxford, 1990).

Regarding the outcomes of students' language learning strategies, the study found that students used many LLS without being asked and taught formally. French language instructors should consider LLS and teach their learners the appropriate strategies. It is also great to motivate students to use all the strategies to foster self-confidence and positive incentives, as effective strategies can help students cope with difficulties.

In addition, instructors should introduce these strategies regularly to encourage students to use them in the language learning process. Thus, students can develop their methods and eventually become self-reliant learners who use appropriate methods. This study may prove that students can learn more languages than they previously believed, regardless of the learning environment. It may be helpful for teachers to consider how to teach language learning strategies to their students.

There is, however, a research limitation that must be addressed. The absence of comparison between online and face-to-face scenarios of the same population may result in a limited understanding of the topic. Furthermore, because there is only one level of the French language, the students change every semester. As a result, if different participants were used in both studies, the findings for comparison studies may be invalid.

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