Unveiling University Students' Learning Strategies in a Blended English Language Course

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Abstract
Extensive research has documented language learning strategies (LLS) in second language learning; however, empirical studies focusing specifically on 21st-century university learners engaged in blended English language courses remain limited. Given the increasing importance of English proficiency and the shift toward technology-enhanced learning, understanding how contemporary learners navigate blended learning environments is crucial. This qualitative study explored the language learning strategies used by 12 first-year Malaysian undergraduates—specifically Islamic school leavers—as they engaged in an English proficiency course delivered through a blended learning approach. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, reflective journals, and document analysis, and analyzed thematically using NVivo 12. Four major themes emerged: (1) involving people, (2) utilizing tools, (3) taking actions, and (4) persevering. The findings reveal that students relied heavily on support networks, leveraged diverse digital and non-digital tools, engaged in deliberate learning actions, and demonstrated persistence despite challenges. The blended approach created meaningful opportunities for autonomy, collaboration, and flexible learning. Implications for English language teaching, particularly in tertiary settings with diverse learner backgrounds, are discussed.
Keywords: Blended Learning, Language Learning Strategies, 21st-Century Learners, ESL, Islamic School Leavers, Digital Learning

Introduction
The landscape of language learning and teaching has transformed significantly over the past decade. Modern learners often labeled as *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001) are highly familiar with technology, mobile devices, and multimodal communication. As a result, traditional teacher-centred instruction no longer aligns with learners' expectations, learning behaviour, or socio-digital realities. The current trend in higher education is the implementation of blended learning, an approach that merges face-to-face instruction with online or technology-mediated learning.

Parallel to the evolution of instructional delivery is a growing emphasis on individual learner differences. Recent developments in second language acquisition research highlight how

technology has shaped learner autonomy, self-direction, and use of language learning strategies (Sari & Wahyudin, 2019; Aminatun & Oktaviani, 2019). Learners consciously or subconsciously employ specific strategies which are cognitive, metacognitive, social, affective, and compensation strategies (Oxford, 1990) to support language acquisition. Research consistently demonstrates that knowledge of such strategies contributes to increased learner independence, better performance, and higher motivation (Ayu, 2018; Wahyudin & Rido, 2020).

This gap is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where many undergraduates especially those from Islamic schools enter university with educational experiences rooted in teacher-centred and translation-based instruction. These learners often have limited exposure to communicative English practices and may struggle to adapt to blended learning, which requires higher levels of autonomy, digital literacy, and strategic learning behaviour. At the same time, persistent concerns about English proficiency among Malaysian graduates continue to dominate national discourse, with employers frequently citing weak language competence as a barrier to employability. Understanding how learners navigate LLS within blended environments is therefore crucial for improving language instruction and enhancing graduate outcomes.

To address these issues, the present study investigates how first-year Malaysian Islamic school leavers develop and employ language learning strategies while participating in a blended English proficiency course. This research is novel in its focus on learners within a contemporary blended learning ecosystem, offering insights that bridge sociocultural, technological, and pedagogical dimensions of Second Language Acquisition. The study contributes to the social sciences by providing an empirically grounded understanding of how digital-age learners from traditional schooling backgrounds strategically engage with blended learning, informing the design of more inclusive, responsive, and effective ESL curricula.

Literature Review
Language Learning Strategies Among Millennial Learners
Language learning strategies (LLS) refer to "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable" (Oxford, 1990). Research on LLS often highlights characteristics of the *good language learner*—one who is active, reflective, and metacognitively aware (Chamot, 2005). Such learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning (Anderson, 2003), and they strategically select approaches suited to their individual needs.

For 21st-century learners, LLS are increasingly influenced by Web 2.0 tools, online collaboration, and digital literacy practices. Social negotiation, meaning-making, peer learning, and scaffolding often occur through online platforms (Vygotsky, 1978; Nor Fariza, Hazita & Afendi, 2012). These learners use social media, multimedia content, and communication apps as part of their self-directed learning ecosystem.

Given that strategies are context-dependent and socially mediated, millennial learners' LLS vary according to access to technology, educational background, motivation, and sociocultural norms. Thus, examining how Islamic school leavers navigate LLS within a blended environment offers valuable insights.

Blended Learning in ESL Contexts
Blended learning integrates face-to-face instruction with online learning components, offering flexibility, individualized pacing, and increased learner autonomy. Studies have shown that blended learning i) improves learner engagement ii) supports diverse learning styles iii) enhances access to resources iv) fosters collaboration through digital tools, and v) promotes independent learning behaviours (Mortimer, 2010; Boruta et al., 2011).

In ESL contexts, blended learning provides opportunities for authentic language exposure, continuous practice, and multimodal learning. However, effective blended learning requires students to regulate their own learning, stay motivated, and strategically utilize available tools—skills not always well-developed among traditionally schooled learners.

Methodology
Research Design
This study employed a qualitative multiple case study approach to explore how learners developed and used language learning strategies within a blended learning environment. Qualitative design allows for in-depth exploration of learners' experiences, beliefs, and actions (Yin, 2003). The design is appropriate for uncovering multiple realities shaped by sociocultural backgrounds.

Participants
Twelve first-year undergraduate students from four faculties of a Malaysian public university participated. All participants were Islamic school leavers enrolled in a compulsory English proficiency course delivered through blended learning. Maximum variation sampling ensured diversity in academic background, gender, and proficiency levels.

Participant Selection Procedures
The participant selection process was conducted in two stages. First, open online forums were posted on the university's Learning Management System (GOALS). Students who actively participated in these forums and demonstrated consistent use of full English sentences were shortlisted as potential participants. In the second stage, a total of three to four students from each faculty were selected from the shortlist. The selection criteria included their consistency of engagement, proficiency in using English, willingness to participate in the study, and diversity in terms of gender and academic major. All selected participants provided informed consent prior to the commencement of data collection.

Data Collection
Data were collected using three complementary methods. The first method involved semi-structured, one-to-one interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The second method consisted of focus group discussions with six participants, conducted for approximately 90 minutes. The third method involved analysing reflective journals and coursework documents submitted by participants. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and cross-validated through member checking to ensure accuracy and credibility.

Data Analysis
Data were imported into NVivo 12 for coding and theming following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedures. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and detailed audit trails (Guba, 1981). The analysis generated several key themes that illuminate how learners engaged with and navigated their language learning experiences.

Theme 1: Involving People
Learners consistently relied on interpersonal networks—lecturers, peers, family members, and proficient speakers—as core learning strategies. This reflects the social nature of language learning and aligns with sociocultural learning perspectives that emphasise collaborative mediation (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2020).

Seeking Support from Lecturers
Students viewed lecturers as primary sources of linguistic accuracy and authoritative feedback. This is consistent with studies showing that novice learners in blended courses seek expert scaffolding to confirm understanding (Chong & Reinders, 2020; Reinders & Benson, 2017).

One participant shared:
"If we choose the wrong answer, we ask why. She explained to us in detail. We can easily understand." (S6)
Another admitted hesitation:
"I asked my friend first… last is my lecturer because I am scared." (S1)
This fear of judgement mirrors findings by Choi and Lee (2021), who noted that affective barriers shape help-seeking in higher education ESL contexts. The blended environment, however, reduced these barriers by enabling asynchronous communication with instructors, a pattern reported by Bond et al. (2021).

Peer Collaboration as a Primary Strategy
Peers served as the most accessible support system, especially for clarification, vocabulary checking, and brainstorming. This aligns with research demonstrating that peer scaffolding strengthens confidence and promotes collaborative learning in blended ESL environments (Klimova, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2022).
S4 shared:
"In doing the task, I keep searching information with friends… we also get their views."
WhatsApp-based peer work provided low-pressure spaces for risk-taking in English, similar to findings by Ghufron and Nurdianingsih (2020).

Emotional and Academic Support from Family
Some learners involved siblings or parents, especially those familiar with English. Family involvement in L2 learning is widely recognised in collectivist contexts and is linked to increased motivation and persistence (Sun & Zhang, 2020).

Interacting with Proficient and International Speakers
A smaller subset sought interactions with international or proficient speakers on campus:
"To improve, I can talk with foreigner… at school I only speak Malay." (S4)

This reflects authentic communication strategies—highly encouraged in modern L2 pedagogy (Lee, 2020)—and supports findings that informal English interactions outside the classroom contribute to speaking fluency and confidence (Sung, 2021).

"Involving People" demonstrates that learners depend heavily on social support as a deliberate LLS. This aligns with Oxford's (1990) social strategies but is now amplified through blended platforms, peer networks, and messaging applications (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2022).

Theme 2: Utilizing Tools
Students actively used a wide range of digital and traditional tools. As recent studies note, technology-supported L2 learning requires learners to create personalised learning ecosystems (Wang et al., 2023; Kan & Bax, 2021).

Internet Searches and Online Learning Resources
The Internet was the most frequently utilised tool for vocabulary, grammar checking, example gathering, and topic exploration:
"Using internet to search vocabulary to make an essay… I learn new vocab." (S1)
This aligns with findings by Hashim and Yunus (2022) that Malaysian undergraduates rely on online resources to fill linguistic gaps and enhance autonomy.
YouTube, in particular, was central for pronunciation, listening, and modelled discourse—consistent with studies showing that video-based learning enhances multimodal language acquisition (Chien, 2020; Lin & Wang, 2024).

Google Translate as a Cognitive Support Tool
Many participants admitted heavy reliance on Google Translate:
"Google Translate is my favourite website… I check first there." (S10)
Recent studies show that learners increasingly depend on machine translation to scaffold writing, compensate for vocabulary gaps, and reduce anxiety (Alhaisoni & Alhaysony, 2021; Lee, 2022). While imperfect, Google Translate boosts confidence and accelerates comprehension—especially among lower-proficiency learners.

Social Media and Communication Apps
WhatsApp was extensively used by learners for various academic purposes, including coordinating assignments, engaging in peer discussions, seeking clarification, participating in vocabulary challenges, and receiving reminders from instructors. This pattern of usage aligns with previous findings showing that WhatsApp-based ESL learning supports higher levels of engagement, collaboration, and motivation in blended and online learning contexts (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2020; Kessler, 2021). One participant (S9) highlighted the platform's immediacy and convenience, noting that *"WhatsApp groups are helpful… the lecturer shares information in the group."*

Learning Management System (LMS)
LMS provided structured access to materials, quizzes, forums, and assignment submissions. Students valued the flexibility and transparency it offered:
"I can receive homework anywhere… GOALS helps me submit assignments anytime." (S1)
Research confirms that LMS platforms improve self-regulated learning, accountability, and continuous engagement in blended environments (Martin et al., 2020; Bond et al., 2021).

Audio-Visual Tools: Songs, Films, and Online Videos
Participants reported watching English movies—sometimes without subtitles—and listening to English songs to acquire vocabulary and improve pronunciation:
"Watching movie helps me get better vocab… good for beginner." (S4)
This is supported by recent research showing that audio-visual input enhances incidental learning and supports comprehension for lower-proficiency learners (Peters et al., 2022; Rodgers & Webb, 2020).

Traditional Tools
Despite their reliance on digital devices, many students continued to use print dictionaries, notebooks, textbooks, and storybooks as part of their learning toolkit. This observation aligns with blended learning literature, which emphasises that effective L2 learners typically employ hybrid tool systems and select learning resources that correspond to their familiarity and confidence levels (Sato & Loewen, 2022).

"Utilizing Tools" shows that learners assembled complex multimodal ecosystems—a hallmark of 21st-century LLS. Their choices reflect autonomy, convenience, and digital literacy (Kan & Bax, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2020).

Theme 3: Taking Actions
This theme captures the deliberate, conscious actions learners took to navigate language learning tasks. These actions reflect cognitive and metacognitive strategies identified in modern LLS literature (Oxford, 2017; Teng & Zhang, 2021).

Help-Seeking as an Intentional Learning Behaviour
Students actively sought clarification from a range of sources, including peers, lecturers, online dictionaries, search engines, and family members. This multi-layered help-seeking behaviour aligns with findings that effective L2 learners strategically access multiple sources of assistance to support their learning (Zhang & Teng, 2021; Lee, 2020).

Preparation Strategies: Planning, Rehearsing, and Drafting
Learners prepared mind maps, wrote drafts, rehearsed presentations, and gathered examples before writing or speaking tasks:
"I search the topic and elaborate with my idea." (S10)
Such metacognitive planning is strongly associated with improved performance and autonomy in blended courses (Teng & Zhang, 2021; Liu & Stapleton, 2022).

Translation as a Foundational Scaffolding Strategy
Participants frequently translated text from Malay to English—and sometimes Arabic to Malay—using Google Translate or their own knowledge:
"I write in Malay first, then Google translate… then I try to make my own sentence." (S12)
Recent studies confirm that translation remains a dominant and effective strategy among Asian EFL learners, helping them process meaning and reduce anxiety (Nureni & Yahaya, 2022; Alhaisoni & Alhaysony, 2021).

Learners engaged in conscious, structured actions reflecting metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies. These findings align with contemporary LLS models highlighting

planning, monitoring, and resource management in digital learning environments (Oxford, 2017; Teng & Zhang, 2021).

Theme 4: Persevering
This theme captures learners' resilience and sustained engagement with English—key traits linked with L2 success (Dörnyei, 2020; Mercer & Ryan, 2021).

Repeated Language use Despite Errors
Students attempted to use English in conversations, WhatsApp messages, and presentations:
"I keep using the language even broken… always use it." (S4)
This aligns with studies showing that willingness to communicate increases gradually when learners are supported in low-pressure blended environments (Lee & Hsieh, 2020).

Vocabulary Expansion through Informal Exposure
Learners sought vocabulary through songs, movies, peers, and mobile dictionary apps:
"I learn many vocabulary… makes me improve." (S5)
Incidental vocabulary acquisition through input-rich media is well-documented (Peters et al., 2022; Webb & Nation, 2020).

Audio-Visual Persistence as Immersion Strategy
Several watched English movies in the library without subtitles:
"We watch English movie… it helps." (S2)
This reflects immersive learning strategies reported in modern ESL studies (Rodgers & Webb, 2020).
Perseverance manifested through consistent engagement, willingness to practice, and gradual confidence-building—traits supported in current motivational research (Dörnyei, 2020; Mercer & Ryan, 2021).

Across all themes, the findings demonstrate that Islamic school leavers strategically used people, tools, and actions to support their learning processes. They actively engaged with digital ecosystems, gradually developed greater autonomy over the course of the semester, and relied heavily on both social and technological scaffolding. Despite their initially low confidence, they also showed strong perseverance in navigating the demands of blended learning. These patterns are consistent with recent work on blended learning, digital language learning strategies, and sociocultural mediation (Bond et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023).5.

CONCLUSION
This study highlights the dynamic and multifaceted language learning strategies used by Malaysian Islamic school leavers in a blended English course. Students leveraged social networks, digital tools, and personal learning actions to navigate challenges and enhance learning. Blended learning empowered learners to engage autonomously, access diverse resources, and develop greater linguistic confidence.

The findings underscore the need for strategy-based instruction tailored to learners' backgrounds, culturally responsive pedagogies, stronger integration of digital tools in ESL teaching, structured support to foster learner autonomy, and greater emphasis on informal learning opportunities. Future research should include larger sample sizes, employ

longitudinal designs, and conduct comparative studies to deepen understanding of language learning strategy development in blended environments.

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