

English Language Learning Strategies among ESL Students in Malaysia: A Systematic Literature Review

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 03 January 2026
Revised 24 June 2026
Accepted 05 July 2026
Online first 15 July 2026
Published 31 October 2026

Keywords:

English as a second Language (ESL)
Language learning strategies (LLS)
Malaysian education
Metacognitive strategies
Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.24191/gading.v29i2.783>

ABSTRACT

The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) investigates English Language Learning Strategies (LLS) employed by ESL students within the Malaysian educational context, particularly focusing the period of 2018 to 2024 after the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Guided by PRISMA protocols, seven empirical studies were selected from Scopus and Web of Sciences databases based on meticulous inclusion and exclusion criteria. It was found that metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring and evaluating were the most widely used and effective across various education levels, followed by cognitive and socio-affective strategies. It had also revealed that university students were the most frequently studied population, leaving a research gap in primary, secondary and vocational education settings. The review underscored the need for more diversified research to inform pedagogical innovation and enhance teacher training programs to fit the students' strategic learning needs. The review contributed to a clearer understanding of how LLS facilitate English proficiency among Malaysian ESL learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mastering a new language can be challenging, especially for students learning English as a second language (ESL). In Malaysia, where English is not the native tongue, it is vital for everyone to achieve a strong command of the language to progress. Good language learning strategies are crucial in this context, to help students in enhancing their proficiency to succeed in both academic and professional endeavours.

Language learning strategies (LLS) can be defined as the specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students employ to improve their progress in developing skills in the target language (Graham & Oxford, 1993; Vû et al., 2021). Chamot (2004) described LLS as intentional methods, approaches, or actions that students use to aid in learning and remembering both language-related and content-based information while (Cohen, 2014) suggested it as language learning strategies involve

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deliberate thoughts and actions that learners use to enhance their comprehension and knowledge of a target language. These strategies are widely recognised as crucial contributors to learners' language proficiency and overall language development. Such strategies include cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective approaches that learners use to enhance their language learning (Athirah Mohd Nasir & Abd. Aziz, 2020; Robin et al., 2021; Ze Xu et al., 2023). The most popular LLS are the ones proposed in the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990) which comprises of direct (memory, cognitive, compensation) & indirect (metacognitive, affective, social) strategies.

Nevertheless, research indicated that students employ diverse strategies, and these strategies tailored to individual learning styles and needs can significantly benefit students in their English language learning journey (Ma & Abdul Samat, 2022). For instance, a study conducted on English juniors at Dalat University revealed that female students tend to apply language learning strategies more frequently than their male counterparts, though some studies have shown contradictory or no significant gender differences (Vũ et al., 2021). Another study focused on secondary school ESL students in Malaysia revealed that they primarily employed metacognitive strategies, followed by cognitive and memory strategies (Malip et al., 2022). They were highly motivated to learn English and actively applying variety of strategies to aid their language growth (Robin et al., 2021). Consistent across multiple studies, evidence suggested that the more learners engage with language learning strategies, the higher their language proficiency tends to be (Madolimovich, 2022; Par, 2020; Tai & Zhao, 2024).

Beginning in 2017, the Ministry of Education slowly implemented CEFR into the education system, starting from primary schools which differ from the concept of the previous ones (Affendy Lee et al., 2022). In general, the Malaysian education system has undergone three major reforms since its inclusion. The first reform in 1982 introduced the Integrated English Language Syllabus for primary and secondary schools, focusing on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). However, it faced challenges, including mismatches between syllabus objectives and classroom practices. The second reform in 2002 aimed to enhance CLT with School-based Assessment (SBA) and introduced teaching Mathematics and Science in English, but it also encountered resistance. The latest initiative, the English Language Education Roadmap 2015-2025, aims to align Malaysian English education with international standards, using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Globally, the use of CEFR is growing, with studies showing its influence on various educational elements like curriculum development and teacher training. Hence, there must be new data emerged within time, with regard to the English language learning strategies employed by the students; be them in primary, secondary or tertiary level, focally in Malaysia context. This systematic literature review (SLR) aimed to explore recent studies, particularly after the implementation of CEFR from 2018 to 2024, focusing on the usage language learning strategies (LLS) in ESL settings in this country. It also sought to identify the most common strategies ESL students use to learn English along with the factors affecting their strategy choices. Additionally, the study aimed to improve teacher training programs by developing more innovative and effective teaching methods to better meet students' needs according to their level (primary, secondary or tertiary). Therefore, this review addressed two research questions:

- i. What are the most effective and widely used English language learning strategies reported in the literature?
- ii. What are the primary educational settings that have been the focus of research regarding language learning strategies in ESL contexts?

Unlocking the potential of language learning strategies is crucial for ESL students in Malaysia. By understanding and effectively employing these strategies, students can enhance their language proficiency and achieve greater academic and professional success (Abdul-Ghafour, 2019).

2. METHOD

A collection of 7 articles, which has been published in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) ranging from 2018 to 2024 was analysed. Articles were extracted from these two databases based on the characteristics of educational research because of their high-impact factors and referee system. In order to assure the quality of this systematic literature review, this study adopted Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) and its guidelines outlined as recommended by Page et al. (2021).

The starting point was the identification of 534 documents with the keywords “language learning strategies” OR “LLS, “ESL learners” and English as a second language”, within the article titles and keywords, via a thorough search in the Scopus and WoS databases. After removing the duplicates, 526 documents were considered for the screening phase. In this part, articles were selected according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria as outlined in Table 1.

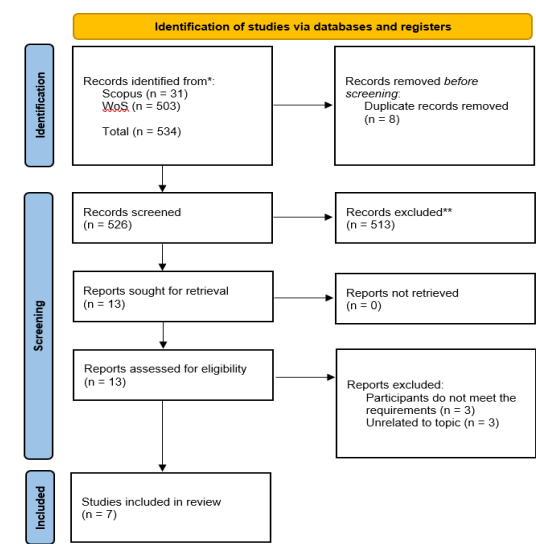
Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	
Inclusion	Exclusion
Research article	Review articles, book chapters, conference proceedings
English text-written	Other than English text-written
Published from 2018 to 2024	Published before 2018 and after 2024
Malaysia context	Studies conducted other than Malaysia context.

In the initial screening process, only research articles were sought for retrieval by eliminating other writings on reviews, book chapters and conference proceedings. Other than that, the articles were filtered to only English written text. In order to maintain the relevancy and objectives of the study, the search of the articles was restricted only to those published from 2018 to 2024. The next step was to take out any other articles that are irrelevant to the topic. Only studies that had been conducted in Malaysian context remained while others were excluded. The first screening part ended with the exclusion of 513 articles based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria leaving only 13 articles to be assessed for eligibility as all articles could be retrieved.

Before finalising the exact articles to be used in this study, there were 6 articles excluded for failing to adhere to the eligibility criteria where the participants did not meet the requirement ($n=3$) and unrelated to the topic ($n=3$). Therefore, only 7 articles were used in this study. The selection process and the generation of the shortlist of 7 articles for this review are depicted in Figure 1, following the PRISMA diagram. To sum up, for the inclusion of documents in this study, articles must fulfill these criteria: a) make reference to the constructs of LLS or strategies-based instruction in titles and keywords; b) be published in an academic journal available through the Scopus and Web of Science databases; c) English written-text; d) have been published from 2018 to 2024; and e) refer to empirical research in Malaysian contexts.

The final number of studies included ($n = 7$) were relatively small, mainly due to the strict inclusion criteria applied in this review, particularly the focus on empirical studies within the Malaysian context and those published between 2018 and 2024. Although this narrowed the pool of eligible studies, the criteria were intentionally set to ensure that the findings remain relevant to the local context and reflect current educational practices in Malaysia. As a result, the review offered more focused and context-specific insights, even though it did not capture a wide range of studies.

Fig. 1. PRISMA diagram as recommended by Page et al. (2021)

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents a summary of the key aspects and educational environments related to LLS found in these studies. Based on the aims of this review, two key findings have emerged: (a) the most frequently applied English LLS within the Malaysian ESL context, and (b) the educational settings that have been most extensively examined in relation to LLS in Malaysia.

Table 2. Summary of studies included in the systematic review

No.	Study	Educational Setting	Reported English LLS
1	Khamis et al. (2024)	13 undergraduate university students	Using audio-visual materials, leisure reading, note-taking, self-speaking practice, music listening, teaching and learning, gamification, and football commentary
2	Wei et al. (2024)	3 high-school students	Peer support & collaborative learning
3	Hashim et al. (2018)	10 undergraduate university students	Cognitive, metacognitive & socio-affective learning strategies (SILL)
4	Sani & Ismail (2022)	112 primary school students	Metacognitive strategies (SILL)
5	Ahmad Ghulamuddin et al. (2022)	250 undergraduate university students	Compensation, metacognitive & cognitive learning strategies (SILL)
6	Ali (2022)	72 undergraduate university students	Metacognitive strategies (LLS)
7	Xuan et al. (2018)	400 foundation students	Cognitive & metacognitive learning strategies

4.1 The most effective and widely used English language learning strategies reported in the literature

One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed studies, as summarised in Table 2 above, is the prominence of metacognitive strategies in English language learning. These strategies, which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning process, were reported in multiple studies (Sani & Ismail, 2022; Ahmad Ghulamuddin et al., 2022; Ali, 2022; Abdul Ghafour, 2019; Xuan et al., 2018). Metacognitive strategies are often associated with improved language proficiency because they enable

learners to take control of their own learning processes, leading to more focused and efficient outcomes (Graham & Oxford, 1993). These strategies help students become more aware of their learning processes and enable them to adjust their methods for better outcomes (Kenol & Hashim, 2022). For example, Sani and Ismail (2022), in a study on 112 primary school students, found that metacognitive strategies were used frequently when students were guided in setting language learning goals and self-monitoring progress through tools like SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning). The same goes to a study conducted by Peter and Hashim (2023) which the findings confirmed that metacognitive strategies, are the most preferred by both ESL and EFL learners. This preference across different age groups and contexts suggests that 'learning how to learn' is a general priority for learners, outweighing particular tactics in perceived importance.

Cognitive strategies—such as summarising, reasoning, and analysing language input—also emerged as essential and effective, particularly in higher education contexts (Xuan et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2018). These strategies help learners actively engage with language input and output, aiding comprehension and retention. According to Sukying (2021), these strategies facilitate the processing and retention of new information, making them effective for vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. Khamis et al. (2024) highlighted the use of multimedia tools, such as audio-visual materials and music listening, as cognitive approaches that not only increase engagement but also reinforce listening and speaking skills. The integration of gamification and content-based strategies (e.g., football commentary) further demonstrates how modern cognitive strategies can be aligned with learners' interests to enhance efficacy. When traditional rote learning is walking away towards multimedia approaches, it reflects how much the modern ESL classroom has changed. Students nowadays are more mentally engaged when there are connections between the lessons and digital habit, instead of relying solely on repetitive drills and practices.

Socio-affective and collaborative strategies were also noted, particularly in studies involving high school and university students. Wei et al. (2024) emphasised the value of peer support and collaborative learning, which align with socio-affective strategies known to lower anxiety and foster a supportive learning environment (Graham & Oxford, 1993). Students can extend their experience and engage more in language learning if they enjoy the process (Yan & Ali, 2021). In the Malaysian ESL context, these strategies tend to work even better due to the strong sense of community. When students feel comfortable and motivated by others, they are more willing to speak up, make mistakes and take risks in learning.

Ultimately, while literature highlights a variety of approaches, it is clear that no single strategy operates in isolation. Overall, a combination of metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies appears to be most effective, with adaptability to learners' contexts playing a critical role in their success (Nguyen & Goodwill, 2010). The evidence suggests that for strategies to be more effective, they must be adapted to the specific educational setting as well as the learner's digital and cultural background.

4.2 Primary educational settings focused on language learning strategies in ESL contexts

The review studies predominantly focused on tertiary-level institutions in Malaysia, particularly undergraduate university settings, which appear in five out of the seven studies (Khamis et al., 2024; Ahmad Ghulamuddin et al., 2022; Ali, 2022; Xuan et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2018). This emphasis on university students could be attributed to the increased academic demands placed on learners at this level, which necessitates more strategic language use, especially in English-medium instruction environments. University learners often face greater autonomy and academic expectations, making the investigation of their learning strategies both relevant and necessary (Ali, 2022; Ahmad Ghulamuddin et al., 2022; Hashim et al., 2018).

In addition to universities, the table indicates some attention given to primary and secondary school settings, albeit to a lesser extent. For instance, Sani & Ismail (2022) explored strategy use among 112 primary school students, showing the early development of metacognitive awareness in young learners. Wei et al. (2024), focusing on high school students, provided insights into collaborative learning in adolescent contexts. However, these studies are fewer in number compared to the university populations,

suggesting a research gap in understanding how language strategies evolve from primary through secondary education in Malaysian ESL contexts. What more, studies conducted in these environments often emphasise the importance of early exposure to effective language learning strategies (Ma & Abdul Samat, 2022; Lukas & Yunus, 2021; Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021).

Foundation programmes (Xuan et al., 2018), which serve as transitional settings between secondary and tertiary education, also received some attention. These learners typically face unique linguistic and academic challenges, positioning them as a key group for exploring strategy development. Nonetheless, there is a clear imbalance in the literature, with the tertiary sector being overrepresented. This calls for a broader investigation into other educational levels and more diversified educational environments, such as vocational training centers and rural schools, to capture a comprehensive picture of ESL learning strategy use across Malaysia (Xuan et al., 2018).

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review (SLR) study is meant to examine the English language learning strategies employed by ESL students in Malaysian context, as well as to discover the primary educational settings that have been the focus of the research. The findings of this study are expected to help in enhancing teacher training programs by promoting the development of innovative and effective teaching methods that are tailored to meet the specific needs of students at different educational levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary. Related articles were taken from WoS and Scopus database which were published since 2018 until 2024 as it marks the year CEFR was implemented into the Malaysia English curricula. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) was adopted and used in this study as a guidance in the article's selection. Results revealed that the most reported English language learning strategy in the literature is metacognitive strategies, followed by cognitive and socio-affective strategies. On the other hand, most of the studies focus on tertiary-level institutions, especially university students, where using effective language strategies is important due to higher academic demands. Although some studies look at primary and secondary school students, they are fewer in number, showing a lack of research on how learning strategies develop over time. Foundation programs also get some attention, as they serve as a bridge between school and university and come with their own learning challenges. Still, because university-level research is more common, there is a need for more studies in other settings, such as rural schools and vocational training centres, to better understand how English is learned across different education levels in Malaysia.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/FUNDING

The authors gratefully acknowledge Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pahang, Jengka Campus, and the Academy of Language Studies for providing the facilities necessary to carry out this research. This study received no financial support from external grants or funding agencies. All stages of the research, including data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation, were conducted independently and fully self-funded by the authors.

7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. The authors confirm that this research was carried out without any personal gain, commercial or financial conflicts. They declare that there are no conflicting interests throughout the research.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Nurul Jannah Ahmad Ghulamuddin: initiated the idea and worked on the data interpretation.
Mohammad Iqbal Afham Mohd Afandi: prepared the literature review as well as the methodology.
Nurhazwani Abdul Halim: 9.

9. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

This manuscript was developed with the assistance of ChatGPT and Gemini for the purpose of initial proofreading and literature identification. The tool/service supported the author(s) in reviewing and refining the content, and the authors assume full responsibility for the final version submitted for publication.

10. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

11. ETHICS STATEMENT

Not Applicable.

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