

The Relationship between Learners' Starting Age in Learning Second Language and Their Choice of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

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Abstract. Age and the choice of language learning strategies (LLS) have similarities with the relationship between the aspects of individual differences, social factor, and the LLS itself. This study aimed to investigate whether and how the learners' starting age in second language learning affects their choice of LLS. 94 ESL learners of two age-based groups were involved in this study. A translated version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 proposed by Oxford and an interview guideline were used in data collection. Such version covers 50 statements designed for the learners of English as a second and foreign language. The SILL identified the learners' strategy by asking them to give a response to a series of strategy statements. The data were then analyzed through inferential statistics. The results of the study revealed that learners' starting age in second language learning affects their choice of LLS due to their different goals in learning English. The early-starting learners generally learn English to communicate properly while the late-starting learners do the same for specific purposes, such as for working and for studying abroad.

Keywords: Starting Age, Language Learning Strategies, Second Language Acquisition

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INTRODUCTION

In second language acquisition, there is a common belief saying, “the younger, the better”. This belief refers to the issue of age in regard to Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH): a biologically determined period of life when someone can acquire a language more easily, generally between the age of two years and the early teens (Cook, 1991; Ellis, 1994; and Brown, 2000). Originally, such an idea was initially proposed by Penfield. He then suggested that early childhood is a more appropriate period for language training (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). However, Singleton and Pfenninger (2019) claim that there are some different notions related to the age issue. Some believe that in most aspects, children are more efficient and effective in second language learning than adults – while others believe the other way around. Moreover, the age issue may also be relevant with learner's choice of language learning strategies since learning outcomes of SLA are indicated by the relationship between the factors of individual differences (including age), social factor, and the language learning strategies (LLS).

Oxford (2001) defines learning strategies as the mental and conscious steps or actions done by learners to facilitate their tasks and make their learning faster, more effective, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and also more transferable to new situations. In addition, Tavosy and Jelveh (2019) state that learning strategies are procedures or techniques applied by learners to support the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information for the sake of being more proficient language learners. Oxford (1990) divides strategies into two big groups, namely direct and indirect; and these two are categorized into six types of language learning strategies. Direct strategies include three types, namely memory, cognitive, and compensation – while the indirect ones are comprised of three subcategories, such as metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The detailed description of each domain is discussed in the following passages.

First, memorization strategies are techniques that deal with memory. The techniques are used to memorize more effectively, enabling learners to remember important information they have acquired from the learning process. The techniques will be beneficial when the learners need certain information because they allow them to retrieve it more quickly. . The example of the use of these strategies is the semantic map of a group of verbs, nouns, or adjectives that covers the relationship between the words (Wahlheim et al., 2016).

The second one is cognitive strategy. It deals with the mental techniques that learners use to make sense of their learning. The strategies cover reasoning, analysis, and implying conclusion. The example of the use of these strategies is the use of dictionary to find the meanings of difficult words (Ashman & Conway, 2017).

Next, compensation strategies are those related to the gap or the lack that the learners find in the process of language learning and how they manipulate it. These strategies will encourage them to practice speaking and writing in the target language despite their limited vocabulary. The instance of compensation strategies is the use of context to guess the meaning of words and the use of synonyms to overcome the gap of vocabularies (Taheri & Davoudi, 2016).

Furthermore, there are metacognitive strategies that help language learners to regulate their cognition, focus, plan and evaluate their progress. In other words, metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own learning. The use of metacognitive strategies can be represented both when a learner evaluates the material that he/she already knows and when he/she decides on what to pay more attention to (Chou, 2017; Segalowitz, 2016; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019).

The next one is affective strategy. As can be seen from the name, affective strategies have to do with learners' feelings. The affective strategies develop self-confidence of the learners to become involved in language learning process. For instance, a learner may reward themselves for his/her language achievements (Segalowitz, 2016; Tavoosy & Jelveh, 2019; Wijirahayu & Dorand, 2018). The last but not least, it is Social strategy. Social strategy increases interaction in communication practice – and these are deemed essential considering that the main aim of language learning is being able to engage well in a communication. The example of social strategies can be seen when learners do a discussion or work on team work in a target language to improve his/her language skills (Aziz & Shah, 2020; Psaltou-Joycey, 2020; Solaiman et al., 2019).

There have been studies documenting language learning strategies, especially regarding different factors that affect learners' choice and use of LLS. These factors include language being learned, learners' proficiency, learners' gender, learners' degree of metacognitive awareness, learners' age, learners' attitudes, learners' motivation, learners' field of specialization, learners' national origin, and language teaching methods (Oxford, 2001). In Indonesia, English is considered as a foreign language used in occasional conversation. Nonetheless, English may still be deemed as a second language as it is mostly learned after Bahasa and ethnic language. Second language learning (L2) is a term used to explain the learning of all other languages in addition to one's mother tongue languages in various situations and for various purposes (Psaltou-Joycey, 2020; Stracke, 2016). In terms of theoretical and practical implications, this study identifies that there is a gap between the theoretical and practical belief of the use of second language affected by learners' starting age. It is focused on both the skills that the educators provide the students in the English classroom and on what they actually need to attend in the content area learning. The researchers gathered previous studies related to the factors affecting the learners' choice of LLS upon the ESL. As a result, the factors such as national origin (Tavoosy & Jelveh, 2019), proficiency (Zheng et al., 2016), and language teaching methods (Segalowitz, 2016), have been found to be strongly related to the learners' choice of LLS. On the contrary, the other factors including age, gender, and motivation have not been examined in a wider context. Only few studies conducted on the influence of age, gender and motivation (Alhaysony, 2017; Hardan, 2013; Mirshekaran et al., 2018; Stracke, 2016). Hence, this study examines the factor of starting age in second language learning in relation with the choice of LLS by the learners. This study aimed to investigate how the learners' starting age in second language learning affects their choice of LLS under the research questions of: 1) Does the learners' starting age in second language

learning affect their choice of LLS?; 2) How does the learners' starting age in second language learning affect their choice of LLS?.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study attempts to find out the use of LLS by Indonesian ESL learners who start learning English at different ages. In the completion of this study, the researchers employed an appropriate research design and suitable instruments and procedures. Upon the data collection, data analysis was conducted through inferential statistics. This study is a comparative study using a mixed approach (quantitative and qualitative) that compares the use of language learning strategies by Indonesian learners who started learning English at different ages (early-starting learners and late-starting learners) (Aziz & Shah, 2020).

94 participants (37 males and 57 females) were involved in this study. They are ESL learners of intermediate level and speak Indonesian as their native language. They were divided into two groups based on their starting ages in learning English. The first group, group A, consists of 46 early-starting learners (start learning English before the age of 7) while the second group, group B, includes 48 of late-starting learners who started learning English at or after the age of 12. Singleton & Lengyel (1995) states the age of 12 is considered as the end point of the critical period of language learning.

To measure the participants' choice of strategy, a translated version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 proposed by Oxford (2001) was used. This version covers 50 statements designed for the learners of English as a second and foreign language. The SILL identifies the learners' strategy by asking them to give a response to a series of strategy statements, such as, "I use rhymes to remember new English words," "I use flashcards to remember new English words" or "I physically act out new English words". The response is derived from the use of a 5-point Likert scale from "never true of me", "usually not true of me", "somewhat true of me", "usually true of me", until "always true of me". The instrument provides six subcategories of LLS; they are: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The alpha reliability of SILL was estimated at .76, meaning that the score was over its acceptable value of .70 (Conklin & Pellicer-Sánchez, 2016; Sadeghi & Attar, 2013). The data from questionnaire was collected in December 26, 2019.

In addition to the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview with some of the participants (38) was also conducted to gain more in-depth information on the learners' choice of LLS. Within the interview, some data on the learners' reasons for the use of a LLS and their goals in learning English was also gathered to support the main data. In sum, 10 guiding questions in the interview regarding the participants' goals in learning English their choice of language learning strategies used, and their reasons in choosing such learning strategy choice. The interview was conducted through a semi-structured interview with Bahasa being the means of communication to obtain in-depth information. It was conducted online on December, 27 – 29, 2019, with each lasting 10 – 15 minutes.

The quantitative data gathered from the SILL questionnaire were analyzed through inferential statistics. The analysis was conducted to reveal whether or not

the groups' mean differences were statistically significant. Further, the qualitative data obtained from the interview were analyzed to gain information to support the result of the questionnaire. All of the responses from both groups of participants were compared in order to show whether there were significant differences between the choices of language learning strategies of the participants (early starting learners and late-starting learners). The analysis of interviews was also focused on a particular aspect to investigate the goals of the participants' in learning English and their reasons for the strategy use.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative results from the questionnaire were analyzed by comparing the subjects' responses in the 50 item SILL questionnaire. The items were categorized into six strategy groups, including memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. All of the participants responded to the items based on the Likert scale that ranges from 1 to 5. This was implemented to reflect how relatable each statement was to them. In short, the greater the number, the more the statements were true of the participant. Below is the table that sums up the findings of the study.

Table 1. Means Score in Each Strategy Group

No	Strategy Groups	Means Score	
		Group A	Group B
1	Memory	3.34	3.93
2	Cognitive	4.26	3.78
3	Compensation	3.71	4.22
4	Metacognitive	4.04	3.75
5	Affective	3.63	3.83
6	Social	3.64	3.33

To examine the participants' use of LLS, the two groups' means score in each strategy group was compared, as can be seen in table 1. It can be inferred that Group A's means scores were higher than those of Group B's in three kinds of strategies, including cognitive, metacognitive, and social. However, Group A's means scores were lower than those of Group B's in three other kinds of strategies: memory, compensation, and affective.

Thus, the quantitative data from the questionnaire above shows that learners' starting age in second language learning affects their choice of Language Learning Strategies (LLS). Furthermore, the data was then analyzed through ANOVA to investigate if the difference of the two groups' means scores in each strategy group was statistically significant. Since all the significance levels were above 0.05, it was concluded that group A (early-starting learners) did not differ significantly from group B (late-starting learners) in using each of the strategy group.

It can be seen from the data that the early-starting learners mostly used cognitive strategies compared to the use of other strategies. Meanwhile, the late-starting learners mostly used compensation strategies in second language learning. On the other hand, memory strategies are the least used one among the other strategies by early-starting learners. Meanwhile, the late-starting learners or the older beginners used social strategies less than the other language learning strategies (LLS).

Moreover, the quantitative data was also supported by qualitative data from the interview implying the same thing that the early-starting learners' group was found to be opting for the use of cognitive strategies more than the late-starting learners' group. On the other hand, the late-starting learners group employed compensation strategies more than the early-starting learners' group did. The data from the interview tells that the reason of this difference is because the early-starting learners already learn English longer compared with the late-starting learners, resulting in their cognitive being more familiar with language learning without so much compensation. The early-starting learners tended to use cognitive strategies (reasoning, analysis, and implying conclusion) that encourage the learners to make sense of their learning. They used this strategy type since they believed they may be able to obtain language information in every process, ranging from reasoning, analyzing, to concluding. This suggests that with cognitive strategies, learners are able to interact with the new language information in a variety of ways (Chou, 2017; Mirshekaran et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the elaboration of the interview question revealed the data on the use of language learning strategies (more real or detailed activity, not categories anymore) by both of groups. In memory strategies, the early-starting learners did not use images and sounds in a similar fashion the late-starting learners did. Ellis (2019) and Lim and Griffith (2016) claim that early learners tend to employ strategies in a task-specific manner, while the late learners are mostly making use of generalized strategies, which they employ in a more flexible way. In metacognitive strategies, the late-starting learners used much arranging and planning, while the early-starting learners tended to evaluate their learning more frequently than by doing self-monitoring and self-evaluating. Concerning compensation strategies, the early-starting learners only used the technique of guessing for meanings of unknown words (Al-Fadley et al., 2018; Psaltou-Joycey et al., 2018). Contradicting the late-starting learners that use more compensation strategies, they need to focus on some critical points including guessing intelligently to find out the meaning and also overcoming the limitations on speaking and writing (Conklin & Pellicer-Sánchez, 2016; Loewen & Sato, 2017; Sadeghi & Khonbi, 2013).

Since the late-starting learners or older beginners only have fewer period in English learning, they have to work harder in acquiring second language (English). On the contrary, the early-starting learners or the young beginner tend to be in high proficiency level of English learners since they were learning English longer. Chamot (1987, 1988), Dickinson (1987), Lim and Griffith (2016) find that learners with high proficiency level know how to use suitable strategies to fulfill their learning goals, while learners with low proficiency level are less expert in their strategy use and

choice. Therefore, students' starting age does influence their choice on Language Learning Strategy (LLS).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Learners' starting age in second language learning affects their choice of Language Learning Strategies. Learners who start learning English as second language at different ages have a different choice of LLS due to different goals in learning English. The early-starting learners mostly learn English in order to be able to communicate in English properly. On the other hand, the late-starting learners learn English in order to fulfill specific purposes such as for work and university requirement. Furthermore, two implications may be drawn from this study. First, it is important to consider and incorporate the language learning strategies into English Language Teaching (ELT) in to make learners more autonomous, considering that one of the teaching goals is enabling students to know how to learn. Second, teachers have to be able to promote teaching strategies that are appropriate with the students' way of learning.

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