

# Language Learning Strategies of High-Performing ESL Learners in Selected Malaysian Boarding Schools

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the specific language learning strategies employed by Form 4 English as Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysian boarding schools, focusing on the four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Thirty high-performing students from two boarding schools one in Melaka and another in Selangor were purposely selected based on their consistent academic achievement in the national examination pertaining to English. A quantitative research design was employed using a structured survey adapted the Language Strategy Use Inventory by [9], comprising 88 items covering six strategy domains: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social. Descriptive statistical analyses, including mean scores and standard deviations, revealed that successful learners most frequently employed cognitive and compensatory strategies across all four skills. In listening and speaking, strategies such as mimicking intonation, using context clues, and switching to Malay when necessary were common. In reading and writing, learners preferred techniques like rereading difficult parts, planning before writing, and revising written output. Less frequent use of metacognitive and social strategies suggests a need for greater emphasis on planning, monitoring, and interactive learning in ESL pedagogy. The findings provide insights into learner behaviour in high-performance educational settings and inform targeted instructional practices to foster strategic language learning among ESL students.

**Keywords** - Successful language learners, language learning strategies, boarding school, ESL

## INTRODUCTION

English proficiency has shifted from being merely an academic subject to a crucial competency asset which can empower an active participation of individuals in academic, professional, and digital spheres in the 21st century. In recognition of this, Malaysia has made English a compulsory subject throughout its education system and aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards, which establishes explicit benchmarks for language competence [19]. Nevertheless, despite these sustained policy efforts and structural reforms, national assessments continue to reflect underperformance. The 2024

SPM results, in which over 41,403 candidates failed English, underscore the urgency to revise and strengthen the language learning practices [12].

Numerous studies indicate that language learning strategies (LLS) play a significant role in fostering English language proficiency, particularly when these strategies are explicitly applied for the development of specific skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking [11], [24]. Hence, the strategic use of LLS bridges the gap between language instruction and the educational goals outlined by the CEFR along with the 21st-century learning framework, which emphasises autonomy, flexibility, and lifelong learning skills [36]. Accordingly, identifying the LLS adopted by the successful learners is essential in providing valuable guidance for designing pedagogical approaches that support strategic language acquisition. Recognizing the importance of context in shaping learning strategies, Malaysian boarding schools offer an optimal context for examining the real-world application of language learning strategies among high-achieving students [28].

In response to the need for empirical insights into effective language learning strategies, this study employs a structured quantitative design, focusing on 30 high-achieving Form 4 students in two Malaysian boarding schools and adapting [9]'s Language Learning Strategy Inventory. Focusing on the four core CEFR-aligned language skills, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. What listening strategies do successful language learners employ in Malaysian boarding schools?
2. What speaking strategies do successful language learners employ in Malaysian boarding schools?
3. What reading strategies do successful language learners employ in Malaysian boarding schools?
4. What writing strategies do successful language learners employ in Malaysian boarding schools?

Through descriptive statistical analysis, the study aims to uncover patterns in strategy use that can inform targeted, skill-specific ESL instruction. By aligning with CEFR goals and the broader vision of 21st-century learning, the findings offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance language education in Malaysia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Language Learning Strategies

LLS are vital in the process of acquiring a new language. [33] described them as tools and techniques employed by learners of a second language (L2) to effectively organize and recall linguistic samples. [8] also defined LLS as the conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviours that learners use with a clear goal to improve their knowledge and understand a target language. Additionally, [34] stated that LLS are specific actions that learners take to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. In overall, language learners use LLS to facilitate language acquisition and the use of information they receive, store and recall.

There are many approaches to categorise LLS. First and foremost, LLS can be divided between language learning and language use strategies [8]. Language use strategies are strategies to use the language learnt, including four subsets of strategies like retrieval strategies, rehearsal strategies, communication strategies and cover strategies [8]. Furthermore, LLS is categorised based on skills they relate to, namely listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and translation [9]. Thirdly, language learning strategies can be divided into two domains by [34], namely direct strategies and indirect strategies.

Direct strategies are LLS that involve the target language directly and need mental processing of the language [34]. They include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Memory strategies are techniques to help learners to store information in memory to be retrieved when needed, while cognitive strategies are skills learners use to understand better and produce language in a variety of ways, like summarizing, taking notes and repetition [23]. Compensation strategies are behaviours used to compensate and help learners to overcome limitations in learning a new or unfamiliar language [40].

In terms of indirect strategies, according to [34], they involve concentrating, planning, evaluating, finding opportunities, regulating anxiety, encouraging cooperation and empathy to provide indirect support for language learning. Indirect strategies are divided into metacognitive, affective and social strategies. First, metacognitive strategies are behaviours used to arrange, plan and evaluate learning like overviewing and relating to prior knowledge. As for affective strategies, they are techniques that control emotional behaviours and motivation, such as singing in target language to reduce anxiety [23]. Last but not least, social strategies are methods to foster better interaction with others in the target language by cooperating, working and interacting with others while learning the language [40].

### **Successful Language Learners**

Successful language learners actively engage in their own learning process and become problem solvers for their own learning [17]. They employ effective LLS to achieve language learning success.

Besides, successful language learners are very successful in learning the L2 to the extent they can use it skillfully and communicate in English fluently. In addition, successful language learners are characterized as people who always monitor own speech and others', make educated guesses when unsure, strive to communicate and learn through communication, find strategies to overcome challenges in target language interaction, practice the language whenever possible, paying attention to meaning, and lastly attending to form like grammar [38].

From the perspective of [32], successful language learners were found to employ a greater variety and a number of strategies than their less successful counterparts. Later, they found six strategies to be common among successful language learners, for instance, finding language learning style suitable for oneself, involving oneself in language learning process, having an awareness of language as system and communication, continuously putting attention to expanding own language, developing the L2 as a separate system, and considering the demands of L2 learning. However, [18] stated that most researchers have rejected the idea of successful language learners having the same profile, as there are stark differences among equally successful language learners. Hence, language learners can be successful in a variety of ways and such learners are strategic in their learning.

By identifying how successful language learners learn and use strategies, teachers can assist less successful learners with limited strategies to improve their language learning. Language learning becomes more efficient when students are attentive to strategies and characteristics of successful language learners. Therefore, teachers should train their students to utilize good learning strategies that suit their students' needs [37].

### **English as A Second Language in Malaysia**

Starting from the primary school level, English is taught as a L2 in all Malaysian schools [14]. The teaching of English is made compulsory by the MoE, and is taught in all government schools.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 aims to transform the Malaysian education system to produce future generations that could be global players through one out of eleven shifts that includes ensuring English proficiency [25]. Consequently, the MoE implemented a curriculum based on the CEFR to establish a standard level of English to international standards for future generations to compete worldwide [26]. The CEFR implementation also aligns with 21st-century learning that emphasises learner-centred learning in classrooms [45]. Moreover, the CEFR stresses on what learners can do in the language, allowing them to focus on their strengths rather than their inadequacies. This also increases learners' motivation and enthusiasm for learning. Besides, it will boost their confidence and they will not be worried about making mistakes to improve their learning.

The CEFR framework has six descriptor levels to categorise learners' ability to use the target language. Language users are categorised into three main groups, namely, proficient users (levels C1 & C2), independent users (levels B1 & B2) and basic users (levels A1 & A2) [31]. The detailed descriptions of what learners can do are known as "can do" statements for listening, writing, reading and speaking skills.

Based on the English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025, LLS are important in the CEFR context [26]. Thus, to increase their mastery in the English language, learners have to do tasks that need them to utilize LLS effectively, especially in the four main skills, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Therefore, LLS categorised based on skills they relate to, namely listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and translation, are best adopted in the CEFR context in Malaysian ESL classrooms [9].

### Previous Studies

Previous research has investigated the most frequently employed LLS among successful English language learners in Malaysia, highlighting patterns that contribute to effective language acquisition.

To begin with, in a study done by [21] on 50 advanced ESL learners from selected primary schools in Malaysia, the most frequently used LLS to improve listening skills through Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) are memory and social strategies. The learners also used metacognitive and social strategies to improve speaking skills through MALL. For learning writing skills, in a study on 40 highly proficient ESL students from a Malaysian urban secondary school, [40] found that the most popular LLS were memory strategies followed by metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies but the least popular were compensation strategies. In overall, the types of learning strategies differ across the English language skills but memory strategies account for the most popularly used LLS by successful language learners.

Several studies have also examined successful English language learners who later became English teachers in Malaysia, offering insights into the strategies and experiences that shaped their language proficiency and professional development. Based on a study by [17] done on 54 successful English language learners who were ESL educators at various learning institutions in Malaysia, metacognitive strategies ranked the highest for the strategies most frequently used in learning English, followed by compensation, cognitive, social and memory strategies whereas the least frequently used were affective strategies. Apart from that, from a study of 58 teaching ESL degree-holder teachers teaching in various education institutions in Malaysia who are successful language learners, the learners did not rely solely on a particular type of learning strategies because they could employ a wide range of learning strategies to master English listening skills, depending on the situations they encountered [44]. Here, it can be seen that there are contrasting study results in Malaysia with one study emphasizing that metacognitive strategies is the most commonly used LLS among successful language learners and another study suggests there is no single LLS that is most frequently used and instead a wide range of LLS are used.

### METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design by replicating and adapting a questionnaire by [9] to investigate the preferred learning strategies of successful Form 4 ESL learners in Malaysian boarding schools. The survey method facilitated efficient data collection, and the questionnaire was tailored to align with the research questions. The quantitative approach ensured systematic and structured procedures for data collection and analysis.

The target population consisted of 16-year-old students from two Malaysian boarding schools, identified as proficient ESL learners based on their academic performance. A total of 30 students participated in the study, with 22 students from Boarding School A in Melaka and 8 from Boarding School B in Selangor. Both schools are known for their academic emphasis, particularly in English language proficiency. Regarding demographic context, the participants' home language use is primarily Bahasa Melayu (L1), with some students using English (L2) as their first language. Socio-economically, most students belong to the M40 category, with a few from the T20 category. They also have significant access to English outside the classroom, actively engaging with the language through social media content, peer conversations, and gaming, all in English.

To provide context to the students' academic backgrounds, the English subject performance for both schools over the past five years was reviewed using the Subject Average Grade (GPMP) metric, where lower values indicate better performance.

**Table I Gpmp for English in School A And School B**

Year	School A	School B
2020	1.26	2.31
2021	0.91	2.08
2022	1.12	2.14
2023	0.76	1.29
2024	0.74	1.03

The academic background of both schools in English over the past five years demonstrates consistent performance and improvement. These trends reflect both schools' focus on enhancing English language education and provide a reliable context for exploring effective ESL learning strategies.

The sampling method used was purposive sampling, as participants were selected based on specific criteria namely, their age and demonstrated proficiency in ESL. Proficiency was determined through students' performance in the End of Academic Session Assessment (UASA), introduced under the School-based Assessment framework [29]. Only students who scored an A grade ( $\geq 82\%$ ) in their Form 3 UASA English language exam were included in the study, following the MoE's academic grading scheme [29]. Gender representation was nearly balanced, comprising 16 male and 14 female students.

The research instrument was an online questionnaire developed using Google Forms. The questionnaire was adapted from the Language Strategy Use Inventory by [9] to suit the study's research questions. It assessed strategies across four key English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. There is a total of 88 items, structured into six key domains, as shown in Table 2.

**Table II Structure of The Questionnaire and Strategy Focus Areas**

Section	Number of Items	Focus Areas (Subdomains)
Demographic Information	4	Age, Gender, School, Self-Rated English Proficiency
Listening Strategies	26	Exposure to English Sound Familiarisation, Pre-Listening Preparation, Active Listening, Problem Solving
Speaking Strategies	18	Practice Techniques, Interaction Approaches, Compensation Strategies
Reading Strategies	12	Engagement with Texts, Comprehension, Problem Solving
Writing Strategies	10	Basic Writing Skills, Composition Development, Proofreading
Total	88	

All items employed a standardized 4-point Likert scale where respondents indicated their level of strategy use, "This strategy does not fit me", "Tried it, would use again", "Use it and like it", and "Never used but interested". This comprehensive structure enabled systematic measurement of strategy preferences while maintaining respondent engagement through clear, focused question groupings.



Data collection occurred over a four-week period following ethical approval from both secondary schools. The online questionnaire was distributed to the selected students from two boarding schools in Malaysia. Participants were provided with clear instructions before completing the survey. Next, they were given time to answer during class periods. All 30 participants completed the survey, resulting in a 100% response rate.

The collected data were analysed using SPSS Version 28, employing descriptive statistical methods, specifically means and standard deviations, to identify trends in students' LLS preferences. This approach allowed for a quantitative summary of how frequently various strategies were employed by successful ESL learners. The analysis provided a foundational understanding of learners' strategic tendencies in each language domain, supporting the study's objective of informing future pedagogical approaches in Malaysian boarding schools.

## FINDINGS

**RQ1:** What are the learning strategies for listening employed by successful language learners studying in boarding schools in Malaysia?

**Table III Learning Strategies For Listening**

Strategy Type	Subcategory	Item	M	SD
Cognitive	Practicing	Listen to the “music” of English (Notice how voices go up and down in pitch)	3.87	0.43
		Copy how English speakers talk (Their accent, speed, and tone)	3.73	0.45
		Focus on specific English sounds (Pay attention to how speakers pronounce difficult words)	3.33	0.84
		Practice tricky English sounds (Example: ‘th’ in ‘think’ or ‘v’ vs ‘w’)	3.2	1.06
	Receiving and Sending Messages	Listen for important words (Focus on words that give the main idea)	3.5	0.78
		Listen for details (Try to catch specific facts or numbers)	3.37	0.89
		Practice selective listening (Focus on key parts, ignore less important words)	2.93	0.91
Metacognitive	Centering learning	Use what I already know (Think about the topic to help me understand)	3.3	0.88
	Arranging/planning	Research before listening (Read about the topic first if I know I'll hear a talk or show)	2.73	0.98
Compensation	Guessing intelligently	Guess based on what I heard (Use the words I understood to guess the rest)	3.67	0.55
		Use context clues (Guess meaning based on the situation)	3.53	0.82

Social	Asking questions	Ask the speaker to repeat	3.07	0.91
		Ask for clarification	2.97	0.89
		Ask the speaker to slow down	2.8	0.89
Memory	Associating	Avoid word-by-word translation (Try to understand directly in English)	3.47	0.78
	Applying images and sounds	Connect English sounds to Malay words (Example: 'cat' sounds like 'kat' in Malay)	2.87	0.86

A few interesting patterns are shown by the listening strategy data analysis. The most frequent method was to closely listen to English music, which was characterised by the observation of intonation change in speech ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ). The low standard deviation and high mean imply that learners regularly use prosodic elements to enhance their listening understanding. A common strategy was to imitate the accent, speed, and tone of English speakers ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ), which suggests a significant tendency towards mimicry-based learning. Regarding compensation plans, equally notable were the use of context clues (Guess meaning based on the situation) ( $M = 3.53$ ) and guessing based on what they heard (Use the words I understood to guess the rest) ( $M = 3.67$ ). The findings imply that learners often use smart guessing to bridge gaps in listening activities.

The only areas where least used methods were found were the metacognitive and social domains. The comparatively low mean score ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) for researching before listening, particularly reading about a subject in advance suggested inadequate proactive planning or preparation. Among the least used social tactics were asking the speaker to slow down ( $M = 2.80$ ) and asking for clarification ( $M = 2.97$ ). This might imply a reluctance to disturb or involve the speaker for help, which could be affected by cultural or confidence-related issues.

Notably, the cognitive approach of practicing tricky English sounds (Example: 'th' in 'think' or 'v' vs 'w') ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) showed the most variation across all techniques. This shows that whereas some learners engage in phonetic practice, others avoid it entirely, hence stressing different degrees of comfort or exposure to activities focused on pronunciation. Similarly, the poor use of the link between English sounds and their Malay equivalents ( $M = 2.87$ ) suggests that learners rarely use cross-linguistic associations for listening comprehension.

**RQ2:** What are the learning strategies for speaking employed by successful language learners studying in boarding schools in Malaysia?

**Table IV Learning Strategies For Speaking**

Strategy Type	Subcategory	Item	M	SD
Cognitive	Practicing	Start conversations in English	3.47	0.73
		Copy native speakers	3.37	0.81
		Copy polite phrases (How natives apologize/request things)	3.2	1
		Repeat new phrases aloud	3.03	1.03
Metacognitive	Arranging/ Planning	Plan what to say before talking	3.53	0.78
		Try new topics sometimes	3.23	0.86
Compensation	Overcoming	Use simpler words	3.7	0.47

	Limitations in Speaking and Writing	Briefly switch to Malay if needed (Only if the listener understands)	3.7	0.53
		Talk about familiar topics (Hobbies, school, movies)	3.5	0.73
		Use hand gestures/expressions	3.43	0.86
		Mix in Malay words with English sounds (e.g.”Makan” → “I want to ma-kan”)	3.07	1.23
	Guessing Intelligently	Guess what the other person will say (Helps you respond faster)	3.1	0.96
		Try grammar in different ways	2.97	0.96
		Guess or make up words	2.93	1.08
Social	Asking Questions	Ask questions to keep talking (e.g. ‘What do you think about...?’)	3.6	0.67
		Ask for the word I need	3.47	0.73
		Ask others to correct you	3.17	1.09

The study of speaking techniques revealed that students mostly used compensatory techniques to overcome linguistic constraints. Accompanied by low standard deviations ( $SD = 0.47$  and  $0.53$ , respectively), both the occasional transition to Malay and the use of simpler vocabulary acquired the highest mean ratings ( $M = 3.70$ ). This implies regular use as well as constant acceptance among participants. These approaches show that learners value verbal efficiency over grammatical correctness. A common approach was to ask questions to keep the discussion going ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ), suggesting intentional efforts to promote conversation through social interaction.

Mixing Malay words with English showed moderate frequency ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) and the most variety. This suggests that whereas some learners often practice code-mixing, others avoid it maybe because of different confidence levels or different language standards in the classroom.

Indicating a reluctance among learners to interact with unknown language structures, the least used techniques were guessing or making words ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and trying grammar in different ways ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ).

**RQ3:** What are the learning strategies for reading employed by successful language learners studying in boarding schools in Malaysia?

**Table V Learning Strategies For Reading**

Strategy Type	Subcategory	Item	M	SD
Cognitive	Receiving/sending messages	Read English often (books, news, social media)	3.47	0.57
		Skim first, then read deeply	3.03	1.1
	Creating structure	Notice text layout (Headings/subheadings show main ideas)	3.17	0.91
		Summaries as I read (Write 1–2-word notes in margins)	2.87	1.17
Metacognitive	Planning and	Choose fun things to read (Comics,	3.67	0.66



	arranging	sports news, celebrity gossip)		
		Pick the right level (Texts where I know ~90% of words)	3.5	0.68
		Have a reading plan (e.g.1.Preview 2. Read 3. Check understanding)	2.6	1.1
Compensation	Guessing intelligently	Guess what comes next (Predict story endings or article conclusions)	3.37	0.89
		Guess from context (words/sentences as clues)	3.5	0.57
		Use English-Malay dictionary (quick translations)	3.33	0.92
		Use English-only dictionary (Learn definitions in English)	3.13	0.94
Memory	Reviewing/creating linkages	Reread hard parts	3.63	0.76

The reading field's major approach was to choose pleasurable content like comics, sports news, and celebrity gossip ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ). This implies that students show more active participation when the material is enjoyable. Rereading hard parts of a text ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) was frequently used, which suggested students practice repetition to enhance comprehension.

Having a reading plan that included previewing, reading, and checking understanding ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) was the least used method, suggesting a lack of systematic approaches to reading assignments. Another underused approach was summarizing during reading ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ), which might suggest poor metacognitive involvement or insufficient active reading method training.

**RQ4:** What are the learning strategies for writing employed by successful language learners studying in boarding schools in Malaysia?

**Table VI Learning Strategies For Writing**

Strategy Type	Subcategory	Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Cognitive	Creating structure for output	Read what I wrote first (Check previous paragraphs before continuing)	3.67	0.71
		Take notes in English	3.47	0.57
	Practicing	Copy letters and new words	3.27	0.83
		Write different things (Texts, journals, social media posts)	3.23	0.77
	Receiving and Sending Messages	Use writing tools (Dictionary, Thesaurus, grammar apps)	3	1.05
Metacognitive	Evaluating Your Learning	Revise my work	3.7	0.53
		Write first, edit later	3.4	0.89
	Planning	Plan before writing	3.47	0.86
Compensation	Using clues	Use other words when stuck	3.67	0.55
Social	Asking Question	Ask for feedback	3.37	0.89

The most common approach used in writing was revising one's work ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ), suggesting a significant inclination for self-monitoring and editing conduct. With a mean score of 3.47 for planning before writing and a mean score of 3.67 for reviewing previous paragraphs, learners seem to give consistency and structure top priority in their writing processes. Among compensatory techniques, the option of using other words when stuck when faced with challenges ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ) stood out as a common coping mechanism, suggesting linguistic flexibility.

Unexpectedly, the results showed a rather low use and notable difference in the use of writing tools such as grammar apps and Thesauruses ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), implying possible problems connected to digital literacy or unequal access to these tools. Learners' comfort with code-switching or reliance on translation for understanding is suggested by the preference for bilingual (English-Malay) dictionaries ( $M = 3.33$ ) over English-only dictionaries ( $M = 3.13$ ).

## DISCUSSION

LLS employed by learners are not static but they evolve as they encounter new experiences which shape how they learn [20], [47]. Pertaining to boarding school students, the shift is essential for better language acquisition as they adapt to the boarding school environment which is new to them [13], [41].

Living in the same environment, boarding school students receive continuous education by following the good practices demonstrated by the teachers and peers [42]. Unlike students in national secondary schools, boarding school students rely heavily on their teachers for knowledge and on their peers as learning partners, as they do not have access to tuition classes. In terms of curriculum, the system implemented in Malaysian boarding schools' places great emphasis on mastering 21st-century skills to prepare students to be future-proof on a global scale [27]. Based on the prescribed national curriculum, students are encouraged to engage in inquiry-based learning, solve real-world problems, and practise lifelong learning [27].

Considering that only academically excellent students can be enrolled in Malaysian boarding schools, they are regarded as successful language learners who can adapt a variety of LLS according to their learning environment and academic requirement [27]. To acquire language, they tend to employ more LLS more frequently compared to less successful language learners [24].

To acquire ESL, the LLS employed can be categorised into explication and induction. Explication learning occurs when the learners are aware of what they are learning while induction learning happens unconsciously without intention of the learners themselves [43]. In class, the successful language learners learn grammar rules pertaining to the language in an explicit manner from the teacher. Outside the class, they discover the rules of the language by themselves via interaction with their peers on a daily basis in the school compound and the hostel in the target language.

Furthermore, the role of mother tongue is significant in L2 acquisition for boarding school students as they tend to translate their native language to their L2 before engaging in conversations with others in the target language [2]. Despite being successful language learners and considering that English is not their first language, they still practise translation into their mother tongue (Malay). As a result, some respondents reported using cognitive strategies (analyzing and reasoning: translating) and compensation strategies (overcoming limitations in speaking and writing: switching to the mother tongue).

The LLS practised by the successful language learners in the boarding schools clearly reflect the desired outcomes of the CEFR-aligned English language curriculum, which aims to develop confident and competent communicators equipped with 21st century skills including thinking skills [10]. Besides, the popular LLS chosen are consistent with the aim of the curriculum to cultivate Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), namely applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating among students [10]. Across all language skills, most of the LLS chosen by successful language learners require higher-order cognitive processes, as they involve the application, analysis, evaluation, and creation of language based on existing grammar rules. In this regard, learners use language meaningfully rather than focusing solely on memorization and basic understanding of the language.

Across all four skills, it may be suggested that successful learners seem to favour direct strategies (cognitive and compensation strategies) over indirect strategies (metacognitive and social strategies) although indirect strategies are widely adopted by successful learners in the current literature. According to [15], in order for a learning strategy to be effective, other factors such as the learner's environment, the learning purpose and the learners themselves have to be considered. The successful language learners in the sample are boarding school students, which contrasts with the non-boarding school students studied in the existing literature, thus suggesting a difference in terms of LLS among successful learners.

Furthermore, the learner's motivation in learning the language is a key determinant influencing the choice of LLS used [1], [39]. Considering that the samples are all successful language learners, there appears to be no correlation between the choice of LLS and language proficiency, as proclaimed by [35], which is instead linked to the motivation factor. Hence, it is possible that the learners' motivation depends on the learning environment they are in. Learners are like a Performer of a play when employing direct strategies whereas they play the role as a director when the indirect strategies are involved [34]. Ideally learners should be allowed and encouraged to take charge of their learning by acting like the Director which was previously the teacher's role while the teacher becomes less directive and more facilitating [34]. However, many classrooms in Malaysian schools are still teacher-centred due to the presence of high-stake examination and one-size-fits-all national curriculum [16]. When learners do not take full charge of their own learning, they lack intrinsic motivation to learn the target language, which leads to passive learning.

Nevertheless, it is evident that the strategies preferred by successful learners align with contemporary English education, which emphasises practical language use in a global context, as well as flexibility and adaptability to the dynamic needs of society, rather than a sole focus on grammatical accuracy [13]. In this way, the aspiration of boarding schools to nurture world-class learners can be realised.

Despite that, the study employed has yet to ascertain a comprehensive overview of the LLS by successful learners in Malaysian boarding schools due to the limited number of schools involved. In general, there are three types of boarding schools in the system, namely conventional boarding schools, religious boarding schools and boarding schools that adopt the Ulul Albab model [27]. Future studies should include all streams of boarding schools in the sampling process to achieve better data representation within the boarding school context. Additionally, researchers have only studied LLS in boarding schools which represent only a fraction of the 2460 secondary schools in Malaysia; henceforth suggesting room for future research comparing the LLS adopted by successful learners in daily secondary schools, special education schools, vocational schools, religious schools, sports schools and art schools considering that all types of school register language success [28], [30].

Through this study, a key implication of the findings is the need for educators to incorporate explicit strategy training that not only addresses task execution but also fosters learner self-regulation, critical reflection and communicative confidence. Students' success is often associated with the quality of teachers in the classroom setting [4]. Thus, as facilitators in the classroom, teachers should expose learners to a variety of LLS in addition to imparting knowledge [4]. Furthermore, this study highlights the significance of learners experimenting with various LLS during the learning process. To become linguistically competent, one should incorporate a variety of strategies instead of focusing on only a few [44].

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the LLS employed by high-achieving ESL learners in two Malaysian boarding schools, with a focus on the four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Through the use of a structured quantitative instrument adapted from the Language Learning Strategy Inventory by [9], the study identified the frequency and types of strategies adopted by successful learners within the unique context of boarding schools. The findings indicated that cognitive and compensatory strategies were the most frequently utilized across all language domains. These strategies, including mimicking native pronunciation, using contextual clues for meaning-making, rereading complex texts, and pre-writing planning, reflect learners' active engagement, adaptability, and resourcefulness in navigating language tasks.

In contrast, metacognitive and social strategies (those involving planning, self-monitoring, interaction, and collaborative learning) were employed less consistently. This suggests that while learners excel in task-oriented language manipulation, they may lack awareness or structured training in strategies that involve reflection, goal-setting, and interpersonal communication. Such gaps are significant as metacognitive awareness and social interaction have been shown in prior research to contribute meaningfully to long-term language acquisition and learner autonomy.

While the boarding school context offers a more academically rigorous and structured setting, this study affirms that motivation, learner agency and strategic flexibility remain central to language learning success. The classroom teacher, therefore, plays a crucial role: not merely as an instructor but as a facilitator of metacognitive growth and strategic competence. By creating classrooms that are cognitively demanding yet supportive and integrate both language input and learner strategy development, educators can optimize learners' potential. Besides that, ESL teachers are encouraged to implement structured strategy training that teaches learners how to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own language learning. This includes classroom activities such as goal-setting workshops, peer collaboration tasks, and own learning reflection. Future research could explore the impact of sustained, teacher-led strategy instruction on the development of metacognitive and social strategies among ESL learners in a more diverse school setting.

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