



SOME STRATEGIES TO SUCCESSFULLY LEARN AND MASTER EFL

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we argue that mastering a language or more than one language is something that can be successfully achieved by everyone in general, language students in particular, by implementing such strategies as: (1) learning harder; (2) problem-based learning; (3) having good imagination of your future; (4) regular and more intensive practices of English; (5) positive thinking; (6) keeping in touch regularly with great people; (7) writing, publishing, and speaking at academic meetings as often as possible; and, (8), last, but not least, being healthy by thinking well, having good food, having regular exercises, and trying not to smoke. By implementing, among other things, those strategies, language learners, we believe, can indeed be fluent in using the language(s) they are learning, including English as a foreign language (EFL) in the context of this article.

Keywords: Learning, EFL, mastering, and strategies.

INTRODUCTION

This article has been inspired by some dialogues using “WhatsApp” between an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) lecturer, one of the writers of this article, and a student who has been studying for almost seven years at an English department of a university. The dialogues were from March to April 2022. In the dialogues, the texts that the student sent to her lecturer were full of errors/mistakes.

Those errors/mistakes have led us to think that the student could have applied some learning strategies which are so different that she fails to significantly improve her English. At the same time, however, we agree with Vann and Abraham (1990: 177) who say that both successful and unsuccessful language learners basically implement more or less similar strategies in learning a language.

Despite such a dichotomy, however, we propose here some language learning strategies in order to help learners in general, language learners in particular, get rid of their learning problems so that they can be students of great quality when they study at university and/or beyond when they finish their study. In other words, it is our hope that our learners, including the student involved in the dialogues mentioned above, would like to implement those learning strategies in their learning processes so that they can improve their (language) knowledge, skills, and, by implication, character.

EFL, we know, is learned and used in an environment where it is not used as a means of daily communication. In many cases, EFL is not also

used as a means of instruction; it is not even used in teaching EFL itself. That is, EFL learners are usually taught using other language(s) and they, therefore, learn it bilingually (Tans, 1999: 17-18; Nayar, 1997: 31). In Indonesian context, for example, EFL learners usually use Indonesian and/or their local languages as a means to learn it and as a means of instruction for their teachers to teach it (Alisjahbana, 1990).

Teaching and learning practice as such, according to Auerbach (1993), is academically sound, that is, it is fine to use languages other than English in teaching and learning English so long as it can help to improve students’ understanding of the materials being taught. In such a context of learning, like learning in any contexts, we observe, its results are generally categorised into two broad classifications, namely, good and poor results. Good results can be seen in those who are relatively excellent in EFL listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as other aspects of EFL like English structure/grammar and mechanics. These may be attributed to such factors as those related to: (1) teachers whose methods and techniques in teaching are creative, various and excellent; (2) learners themselves who are very active, creative and diligent in learning English and who are talented linguistically, that is, they have high degree of verbal intelligence (Cf. Gardner, 1993); (3) students’ social and physical learning environments which are very supportive like their parents and siblings as well as peers who always support them in learning English and at the same time they have excellent learning facilities and

conducive/calm surroundings, so they can study without any disturbance.

On the other hand, poor results of EFL learning can be seen upon learners whose English is poor, that is, they cannot listen, speak, read and write well in English because, among other things, their mastery of English grammar/structure/mechanics and of vocabulary is not that good. In that sense, regardless of the idea that making mistakes in speaking English or any foreign language is not something which is always negative because it also marks students' creativity in using a foreign language like EFL (Yule, 1990: 154) and regardless of the dichotomy concerning successful and unsuccessful students' learning strategies which are more or less the same, the students categorised as "poor EFL students", we believe, should be helped in order to be free from their English-related problems by offering them some EFL learning strategies¹ that we describe below.

STRATEGIES

Learning Harder

One of the main strategies to succeed in whatever we try to do is to learn harder day by day. Learning² harder, however, will only work if we learn based on our deep reflection on what we have achieved well or fail to achieve. In other words, reflecting on what we are good at or we are not good at yet will help us to improve. In that sense, we have to make sure that we have a very good and sincere reflection of our competence based on a genuine question and a genuine answer to it.

An example of such a genuine answer to such a genuine question can be seen in the following exemplary personal dialogue of a student learning to write in English (Text 1).

Text 1

Reflecting on One's Language Competence

Self-Question	Self-Answer/Determination/Assurance
Am I good at essay writing in English?	No, not yet!
What is it that I am not good at yet? You see there are four major elements of a good piece of essay, namely, (1) content, (2) writing organization;	I guess I am indeed not good at all those four aspects of writing; my content is poor; writing organization is not good; word choice, sentence structure, and paragraph structure are all poor; and, my ability to use mechanics is also poor.

word choice, sentence structure, and paragraph structure; and, (4) writing mechanics like punctuation and spelling.

So, what am I going to do then?

From now on here are things that I want to do: (1) I will read for four hours per day to improve my writing contents; (2) I will study how to build up a good writing organization for one hour per day; (3) I will study harder for three hours per day to improve my vocabulary, sentence structures, and paragraph structures; (4) I will use one hour per day to improve my ability to use mechanics. That is good. Just do your best to implement what you have said. You can do it! Good luck!

It is believed that using such hours as effectively as possible can indeed improve a student's ability to use those aspects of writing in his/her writing. In that sense, it is acknowledged that each student must have different answers to the questions as those answers are based on his/her real competence in writing and/or in using those aspects of writing in his/her writing. In other words, one single student may just focus on vocabulary or sentence structures if he/she thinks that he/she has been good at other aspects, but vocabulary or sentence structures.

Including in this working hard habits is totality in doing our job, namely, whatever we do, our whole body, soul, and energy as well as our resources are all in the work we are doing (Cf. *Kompas* Newspaper, 16/01/2013, p. 16). Some people fail because they fail to be total in their work. It is not because they do not know how to do their job, but it is simply because they fail to be total. The following text is an example of such a lack of totality in writing.

Text 2

(By a Student)

Salve. Good afternoon Prof. Happy Easter Day, may the risen of Christ add peace and love to you and your family. I hope you are health, Sir. I am sorry for disturbing your activities. This is Ani³ one of your guidance student of English department. Sir, I have registered for the proposal seminar exam. From the study program I was notified to consult with the supervisor first about the schedule. When can I take the exam sir? Thank you in advance Sir.

³ A nickname for confidential reason.

¹ Strategy is defined as a major way that people use to achieve their aims/goals.

² Learning is seen as a process through which people, learners, move from being dependent to being independent in doing things and/or in overcoming their problems in their life. Such a movement can be done individually or collectively, consciously and/or unconsciously (Cf. Lindzey et al. 1975: 205-209; Rogers, 1983: 18-20; Neville, 1989: 13; Budiningsih, 2004: 67-75). In other words, in/through/by learning, learners try their best to leave their "zone of proximal development" (a condition where learners cannot be independent in their activities) to an actual development zone (a condition where learners can be independent in doing things they want to).

This text has been written by a student who has studied English at a university level for five years. It was sent to her supervisor. Yet, it has some mistakes/errors. If she had been total in writing it, she would have revised it, individually or by asking for help from others whose English is great, so she could get rid of those errors/mistakes before sending it to her supervisor. In other words, it would have been like the following Text 3⁴, if its writer had revised it.

Text 3
(Edited Version of Text 2)

Salve⁵! Good afternoon, Prof! Happy Easter Day! May the risen Christ add peace and love to you and your family! I hope you are healthy, Sir! I am sorry for disturbing your activities. This is Ani, one of your guidance students of the English department. Sir, I have registered for the proposal seminar exam. The study program has notified me to consult with the supervisor first about the exam schedule. When can I take the exam, Sir? Thank you in advance, Sir!

We guess it is not because she does not know how to use, for example, mechanics like comma and period in the text, but she simply fails to be total writing and in rewriting it. She should have known, for example, that the text should be reedited in order to make it better. Yet, she did not edit it, because she is simply not total in doing so.

Problem-Based Learning

In addition to the hard-working strategy stated above, another learning strategy which is also crucial is problem-based learning. In this strategy, students focus on their learning problems, namely, their real problems in learning, and try their best to overcome them. When they think that their problem in learning English, for example, is related to vocabulary, they then need to focus their learning activities on vocabulary development so that their vocabulary-related problem can be solved; when their problem is on tenses, they need to study how each tense in English is used so that their problems related to English tenses usage can be overcome.

This is also the case for other language skills like reading, speaking, and listening. They have to focus their learning problems on these language skills to overcome them and, therefore, to improve

themselves as learners. In other words, it is to make sure that they can overcome their problems in using English in their essays. This is why, Lindzey et al., (1975) say, this kind of learning is based on reasoning, that is, a “highly conscious, directed, controlled, active, intentional, forward-looking, and goal-oriented thought. Reasoning usually starts with a specific problem and continues until a solution is found – unless the pursuit is interrupted or abandoned” (p. 272).

This problem-solving type of learning strategy, we believe, has to be done on daily basis. In other words, they have to make sure that they keep studying harder on daily basis to improve themselves as has been stated above. This is important because none can improve without working harder or studying harder on this case.

Practising Regularly and More Intensively

The next strategy is that students practise to use English regularly and more intensively. It may mean that they try their best to practise how to speak, listen, read and write in English on regular basis, namely, they will learn to practise how to speak, listen, read and write for hours per day.

They should also practise how to use such aspects of English as structure and mechanics. In that sense, they have to be very intensive in learning how words and sentences, including tenses, for example, are used in English, if, of course, they are not good yet on those aspects. Their practice can be done by, for example, practising themselves to read, speak, listen, and write a lot in English. This is important because reading in or using languages other than English can worsen their English due to interferences from their vernacular or local languages, including Indonesian.

In that context, it is, therefore, important for any language learners to understand the term “*linguaging*,” namely, “*thinking and writing between languages*” and “*strategies for orienting and manipulating social domains of interaction*” (Mignolo, 200:226). This, according to Garcia and Wei (2014: 8), “reminds us that all *linguaging* is enmeshed in systems of power, and thus, can be oppressive or liberating, depending on the position of speakers and their agency.”

For those with good intentions, a language or all languages that they can use or learn to use well must be liberating so long as they use them well in writing and/or speaking. In today’s era, using a language well should be far easier because everyone can have a very good access to any language online through such internet devices as “Google” search engine, “YouTube”, and “TikTok” and/or offline through direct contacts with others through offline

⁴ It is important to state here that revising a text can result in many kinds of versions depending on the creativity of the revisor. So, Text 3 can also be like this: Salve⁴! Good afternoon, Prof! Happy Easter! May the risen Christ grant you and your family peace and love! I hope you are healthy, Sir! I am sorry for disturbing you. I am Ani, one of your guidance students of the English Department. Sir, I have registered for my proposal seminar exam. The study program has told me to consult you first about my exam schedule. So, when can I take the exam, Sir? Thank you in advance, Sir!

⁵ “Salve” is a Latin word used as a greeting for Catholics.

lectures, seminars, and other human activities in which humans meet directly, face to face. The question is, of course, whether they are active and total in using those great facilities or whether they are diligent and all out in joining those seminars, lectures, and many other academic activities that can indeed improve one's knowledge, skills, and even character. It is believed that if they are total and active in joining those activities, their mastery of a language, including English, can indeed be far better day by day.

Dreaming Big

The English learning strategies mentioned above, namely, studying harder, including implementing problem-based learning and practising English on regular basis and more intensively cannot be well done, if the students themselves have no clear dream of their future, that is, what it is that they want to be later in their life. The dream, of course, has to be big because a big dream usually attracts more serious and great efforts to achieve it. It is crucial because a dream, a big one, will motivate learners to do their best despite any hardship they may find along their journey to achieving the dream. In other words, without a dream, a big one, learners would find their lives very boring because they have nothing to achieve (Neville, 1989: 87-122).

In that sense, it is, therefore, always a good idea for parents and teachers to implant a special dream in their children or students very early in their lives. To make them hugely motivate the children or students to learn harder, implement problem-based learning and to practise English regularly and more intensively, such great dreams have to be relevant or based on their talents/potentials, interests, and learning (future) needs.

This is logical because our life reality shows that one who dreams to be a great composer and/or musician, for example, fails to be one, if he/she has no strong music talent. On the other hand, a person who has a great talent on music can, of course, be a great musician if he/she not only wants to, but also does his/her best to succeed as a great musician and, at the same time, he/she is lucky to have a good teacher that leads him/her totally, his/her music learning environment is excellent/conducive, he/she is interested in it, and he/she feels that music is his/her future.

Thinking Positively

This strategy is about controlling our mind, that is, if we work harder, study harder, do our best in life or in using our life energy, build good relationship with others who are also good, have

good characters, wisely use our resources including our wealth, and truly believe that God will always help us no matter happens, we have no reason to think that we have poor future. In other words, it is about thinking that our future life will be just fine, if we play by the rules of life (Neville, 2005: 87-122)

Thinking positively is, of course, important because it helps us to be free from negative thinking, namely, a kind of thinking in which we have no confidence on a better future life because we think that everything and everyone around us can possibly put us in trouble. If a person has that kind of thinking process, he/she could be in trouble. On the other hand, if he/she thinks that his/her future is just fine, he/she will be just fine. This is what Bernie Neville calls the power of suggestion (Neville, 2005: 27-56).

Interacting with Great People

Since non man is an island, that is, none can live alone, it is important that every single person has to live with other people. Yet, just having other people around is not enough. A person needs to make sure that the people he/she wants to be in contact with are great people, namely, those who are good in terms of their character so that they can directly or indirectly influence him/her in more positive directions. Taking him/her to more positive directions will, in turn, help him/her become a more positive person who can also create more positive people by implication. This will create a far better world for all now and in the future.

On the other hand, having people who are basically negative in nature can make someone be negative as well, namely, his/her character can be made worse and he/she. In turn, can create negative people by implications, namely, those who are lazy, intolerant, mediocre, corruptive, destructive and many more poor characters which are destructive to themselves, to others and to their physical environments. It is, therefore, crucial that everyone tries their best to avoid having relationship with those negative people in order not to be negative themselves (Cf. Weber, 2015).

Writing, Publishing, and Public Speaking

Every person has ideas that can help other people make their lives better. It is, therefore, important that those ideas can be heard by others so that they can implement them in their lives that, in turn, can make others' life better too. This can be done through speaking in general, with modern ways of talking like using videos for YouTube and Facebook in particular and writing (publishing) in book forms

and/or articles that can be published online, offline and/or both in any language.

This is to make sure that the ideas can be heard by as many people as possible so that, in turn, it can help to improve others' quality of life (Tans, 2008/2014). It is urgent to notice here though that the aim of speaking and writing (publishing) in such a context must be good, that is, it is not to create trouble; it is for the common good and, therefore, it is based on truth; it is not a hoax or fake news.

In that sense, when one's aim in speaking and/or writing is not positive, it is better for him/her not to speak or to write for publishing. In such a context, they usually say, "saying nothing" or "publishing nothing" is golden. In other words, it is better to be silent or not to write and publish anything than uttering certain words/sentences and/or writing, but it creates public chaos or it harms other people and environment.

Being Healthy

Our daily life shows that having a good health for someone to succeed and enjoy life is crucial. It is undeniably true because how can someone be active in doing something if he/she is sick and has to stay in bed. It is, therefore, important for students and, definitely for everyone, to be healthy by doing such things as thinking good, eating well, moving well, and no smoking (Paturusi, 2012: 33).

Regularly practising those things in one's daily life is important because what is the point of one's being very smart/intelligent, skilful, and having good characters if he/she is sick? In that context, it is important that the students themselves try their best to live a healthy life so that they can be healthy when they finish their study. Having healthy body and mind as such will, in turn, help them to improve not only their personal development, but also the development of others and the safety of their environments.

CONCLUSION

So, do you want to improve your English? Do you want to be good at speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English? Do you want to master English grammar and enrich your English vocabulary? If your answers to these questions are "YESs," it is a good idea that you implement such strategies as: (1) studying English harder; (2) problem-solving learning; (3) having good future imagination; (4) regular and more intensive practices of English; (5) positive thinking; (6) keeping in touch regularly with great people; (7) being more active in writing for publication and in joining/presenting papers in academic meetings; and

last, but not least, (8) being healthy by thinking well, having good food, having regular exercises, and trying not to smoke.

Implementing those strategies and, of course, other ones which are relevant, we believe, will definitely improve one's quality in general, in using EFL in particular.

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