



## THE OUT-OF-CLASS LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA



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### ABSTRACT

*With the influx of international students in Malaysia, English language has become the bridge for communication and instruction in the academic milieu in Malaysian institutions. Most institutions provide English language classes but learning English is mostly done out of classroom environment. This study was initiated to understand how the international students maintain the learning process of the language in this context. In a survey of the Out-of-Class Language Learning Strategies (OCLLSs) of 250 international students in an institution in Malaysia, The findings revealed that they preferred to (1) learn English through watching television programme or movies, and (2) utilise tools mainly technology-affiliated in advancing themselves in the language. The study enables policy makers to develop facilities that could enhance the students learning preferences, which would ensure their successful achievements and future enrollment of international students to the institutions.*

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**Keywords:** English language, International students, Learning environment, Out-of-class language learning strategies, Malaysia, Technology-affiliated, Television programme.

### Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the learning experiences of international students in Malaysia. It documents their preferred ways of learning English out of the formal classroom setting. Indirectly, it highlights Malaysia as having a conducive English learning environment as there are numerous opportunities presented for learning to take place.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

International Students (ISs henceforth) have been flooding the education landscape in Malaysia, especially for postgraduate studies. Although not an English-speaking country, the academic milieu in Malaysia utilises English as its medium of instructions and communication. Thus, institutions in Malaysia set an English language requirement for ISs. Similar to most host countries, Malaysia accepts certificates from international tests like International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). However, ISs who do not meet the language requirement set need to sit for an English placement test runs by individual institutions (Marlyna *et al.*, 2012). If they fail, they have to go for an English Language Proficiency class provided by the institutions where they registered. However, whether they come into the tertiary institutions with IELTS or TOEFL, or pass their English language placement test, it is commented by Barker-Miles (2000) that the English level needed in tertiary studies is much higher than the required level during admission. This is to say that English language learning is an

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ongoing process for these postgraduate ISs. Since there is no compulsory English class for the ISs who come in with IELTS or TOEFL, or have passed the English language placement test, the English language learning happens mainly in out-of-class environment. The environment in this context refers to the society and physical artefacts found out of their classroom that can facilitate the learning of the English language.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

As highlighted, the level of English when the students register and the level that they need to have during their studies is different (Barker-Miles, 2000). The level that they should have or develop is much higher in order to undergo postgraduate studies. Therefore, English language learning is an ongoing process. However, most of these postgraduates do not have to take English language classes, thus they learn English in out-of-class environment. This article discusses a study on the out-of-class language learning strategies of ISs.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The backdrop of the study comprises of literature on out-of-class language learning strategies (OCLLSs) and the underpinning theory is Sociocultural Theory (SCT) by Vygotsky. The deliberation of this section begins with the theory and it is followed by OCLLSs.

### 2.1. Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) is the underlying foundation for this study. This is very apt as it is focusing on the strategies employed by ISs in out-of-class environment or Out-of-class Language Learning Strategies (OCLLSs) which include society and the concept of mediation. This is in line with the concept of mediation which is cornerstone in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Lantolf, 2000). Thus, in light of language learning, "learning is also seen as socially mediated, that is to say, it is dependent on face-to-face interaction and shared processes, such as joint problem solving and discussion" (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). The notion of 'socially mediated' denotes the interaction between the learner and the teachers, peers and members of the society that assist language development of the learner.

Providing assistance is in line with the concept of scaffolding in SCT. It refers to the support given to the learner (novice) by more capable individual (expert) in the society. The support in social interaction is seen in terms of speech, collaborative talk and by providing environment conducive for language learning. More specifically, the learners are guided in doing activities and tasks that require them to use and practice the language.

Moreover, it is worthy to note that the concept of scaffolding in SCT does not stop there, instead it aims for the novice to achieve autonomous learning which means the skill or knowledge of the language is transferred to the novice making him or her capable of performing similar activities or tasks on his or her own. The novice is termed to be able to 'appropriate' or take over (Mitchell and Myles, 2004) the skill and knowledge and be responsible for his or her own learning (Mamour, 2008). Scaffolding is advantageous for the learners as it (a) makes directions clear for them, (b) specifies the objectives of the task, (c) keeps them on task, (d) gives assessment to clarify expectations, (e) directs them to relevant sources, (f) alleviates uncertainty, surprise and disappointment, (g) delivers efficiency, and (h) builds momentum (McKenzie 1999 in Mamour (2008)).

Besides scaffolding where capable individuals support new comers, the concept of mediation also covers physical or abstract artefacts/tools. It can be numbers, arithmetic systems, music, art, language, even pen, pencil, paper and calculator (Lantolf, 2000). This is again very appropriate as in being in out-of-class environment, ISs encounter a lot of materials that might assist or hinder their English language learning.

To encapsulate, the concept of mediation in SCT is the crux of this study. This is because mediation embodies both scaffolding (involving people) and artefacts or tools that may or may not help the ISs to learn the English language.

## 2.2. Out-Of-Class Language Learning Strategies

Out-of-class language learning strategies (OCLLSs) basically refers to the activities by language learners involving the use of target language outside the class. However, it has been termed differently by researchers. [Ihsan \(2012\)](#) has compiled the terms used in the literature, for example out-of-class *learning* by Benson in 2011; out-of-class language *activity* by [Hyland \(2004\)](#) and Chausanachoti in 2009; out-of-class *practice* by Al-Otaibi in 2004; out-of-class *language use* by Anderson in 2004 and out-of-class *language learning strategy* by [Pickard \(1996\)](#). Even though different wordings are used; they refer to the same doings or activities. When dissected, the out-of-class *learning, activity, practice, language use and learning strategy* discuss similar doings such as watching movies, reading newspapers, surfing the net, talking to friends or native speakers, listening to radio, and the list goes on. Thus, the notion of OCLLSs denotes language activities that are done outside of formal classroom.

In discussing OCLLSs, a lot of studies cite research done by [Pickard \(1996\)](#). It is one of the earliest studies that addresses OCLLSs directly. The study involves 20 German-speaking students studying English in their secondary school. They have to answer questionnaire and undergo in-depth interview. The data show that they choose activities that are interesting to them and not those advised by the teacher. More chosen activities fall into the reading and listening-based categories compared to the writing and speaking-based groups. The inclination of the research participants towards utilising receptive skills more than productive skills also echoes in studies by [Pearson \(2004\)](#); [Hyland \(2004\)](#) and [Ihsan \(2012\)](#). These studies are conducted in New Zealand, Hong Kong and Indonesia, respectively. [Pearson \(2004\)](#) participants are Chinese from Mainland China who study in New Zealand. Although these three studies focus on English language learning; unlike [Pearson \(2004\)](#) research that involves international students, [Hyland \(2004\)](#) and [Ihsan \(2012\)](#) participants are nationals in their own countries – Hong Kong and Indonesia, respectively. As emphasized earlier, the findings are similar; i.e research participants use more receptive activities than productive activities.

In Malaysia, the notion of OCLLSs is highlighted after a landmark doctoral study done by Mohamed Amin in 1996 ([Mohamed, 2000](#)). He developed a questionnaire called Strategy Questionnaire (SQ) that looks at language learning in three situations: in-class, out-of-class and test preparation. Concomitantly, local studies have been conducted; among others are for Malaysian learners, learning English by [Faizahani \(2002\)](#) and [Punithavalli \(2003\)](#) Malaysian learners, learning Malay by [Zamri \(2004\)](#) and English learners in Jordan (El-Salleh, 2002). However, these studies look at all the situations, thus there is paucity in local studies conducted focusing only on OCLLSs.

There is some attempt to look at how OCLLSs affects language achievement like done in studies by [Marefat and Barbari \(2009\)](#); [Tagashira et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Noor Saazai \(2014\)](#). They look at OCLLSs and reading comprehension ability, OCLLSs and Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score gains in Japan, and OCLLSs and course assessments. However, the first two produce inconclusive results about the effect of OCLLSs on language learners' achievement. [Tagashira et al. \(2010\)](#) clarify that the questionnaire on OCLL lacks sensitivity to gauge the ever-changing behaviours of students' whereas [Marefat and Barbari \(2009\)](#) justify that OCLL is 'quite new' to the participants of the study (p.91). In fact, [Pearson \(2004\)](#) argues that "[t]here [are] areas which the review of literature suggest [s] would be difficult, if not impossible, to research in a conclusive manner such as the exact contribution of OCLL to overall gains" (p.2). On the other hand, the third study by [Noor Saazai et al. \(2013\)](#) shows that students employ strategies that involve other people and utilise tools in completing their course assessments.

Although some studies have inconclusive results, researchers should not eschew from looking into the importance and contribution of OCLLSs in language learning. The significance of OCLLSs is evident in a seminal study on Good Language Learners (GLLs) by Rubin in 1975 (as cited in ([Mohamed, 2000](#); [Marefat and Barbari, 2009](#))). One of the characteristics of GLLs is their interest in looking for opportunities to use the language, for instance speaking to native speakers and going to the cinema. This notion is strengthened by Stern (1983 as cited in ([Marefat and Barbari, 2009](#))) who highlights that a GLL possesses social learning strategy. The strategy includes making communicative contact with target language and target language community. Hence, even though it is difficult to establish exact contribution of OCLLSs to language gains as shown by a few studies that have

unsuccessfully made direct connection between OCLLSs and language achievement; there are prominent researchers who have posited that OCLLSs can enhance language learning.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the study is to investigate the preferred OCLLSs among ISs in an institution in Malaysia. In conjunction, two research questions have been generated as follows:

- What is the preferred skill employed by the international students in their out-of-class language learning strategies (OCLLSs)?
- Which do they prefer; self, using tools and involving people in their OCLLSs?

### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted through the survey method using questionnaires. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part 1 includes 40 items on OCLLSs and Part 2 is designed for the purpose of gathering the respondents' demographic profile. The arrangement of having the items in Part 1 and questions on respondent's profile in Part 2 is as advised by [Dörnyei \(2010\)](#) as a way to ensure that the respondents are ready to disclose their personal details after finding out that the items are unthreatening.

Part 1 of the questionnaire lists 40 items concerning OCLLSs. All the items are compiled from existing questionnaires and inventories of studies on OCLLSs by [Pickard \(1996\)](#); [Mohamed Amin \(2000\)](#); [El-Saleh \(2002\)](#); [Zamri \(2004\)](#) and [Noor Saazai \(2014\)](#) and also on general Language Learning Strategies like the highly-used Strategies in Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire by [Oxford \(1990\)](#). The 40 items comprise the 'what' and 'how' aspects of OCLLSs. 'What' refers to the five skills of speaking, listening, reading, writing and watching. While 'how' refers to the ways of employing OCLLSs – whether the strategy is being conducted by one's own self (self-directed), involving other people or utilising artefacts or gadgets. The examples of the items for each are in Table 1.

Table-1. Examples of items in Part 1

Aspect		Item
What	Speaking skill	1. I speak English at home with my family/housemates.
	Listening skill	22. I listen to radio programs in English to improve my listening comprehension.
	Reading skill	24. I read English newspapers/magazines to improve my reading comprehension.
	Writing skill	33. I write essays in English.
	Watching	15. I watch English movies to improve my English.
How	Being self-directed	6. While speaking in English I correct myself when I know that I have made mistakes.
	Involving other people	3. I speak English with my friends out of class in the university.
	Utilising artefacts/gadgets	34. I make use of computers to learn English.

The items are evaluated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4; from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. A pilot study was conducted to check on the language use for the items. 11 ISs answered the questionnaires during the pilot study and based on their responses during the administration, the vague or confusing words were improved before the final set of questions was administered to the actual respondents.

The data were keyed in into SPSS Version 19 and the descriptive statistics results were generated to answer the 2 research questions.

#### 4.1. Profile of the Respondents

The questionnaires were distributed in a location that is frequented by ISs. The location is the International Student Centre (ISC) where ISs go to apply for visa and consult on issues concerning visa. They were approached

while they were waiting for their turn for consultation. A total of 250 respondents participated in this study. The data from the respondents' demographic details show that there were all postgraduate students with their ages ranging from 21 to 54 years old. There were 43.6% master's students while 51.6% were PhD students. In terms of gender, there were more male than female respondents. Their percentages were 74.8 % and 23.2 %, respectively.

## 5. FINDINGS

The findings are discussed according to the research questions. Each discussion begins with a deliberation on the keywords or key phrases in the RQ, and it is then followed by the results by comparing the means. *RQ 1 : What is the preferred skill employed by the international students in their out-of-class language learning strategies (OCLLSs)?*

The main key phrase in RQ1 is the 'preferred skill'. The skills that are listed as items in Part 1 of the questionnaire are speaking, listening, reading, writing and watching. 'Watching' actually comprises three skills – visual, listening and reading. The comparisons among the means are as shown in Table 2 below.

**Table-2.** Comparison of means for preferred skills

Skills	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing	Watching
Mean	2.85	2.87	2.84	2.98	3.11

Based on Table 2, the respondents preferred watching with the mean of 3.11. It is followed by writing (2.98), listening (2.87), speaking (2.85) and lastly reading (2.84). Thus, it seems that they actually favoured combined skills rather than singular skill.

The findings are discussed in greater details through the comparisons between master's and PhD students, and also between male and female respondents. Table 3 has the information.

**Table-3.** Comparisons of master's/PhD and male/female for preferred skill

	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing	Watching
Master's	2.89	2.94	2.86	3.04	3.20
PhD	2.85	2.81	2.85	2.97	3.07
Male	2.85	2.84	2.82	3.06	3.17
Female	2.86	2.94	2.90	3.07	3.06

Table 3 shows the means of the skills compared between master's and PhD students, and between male and female respondents in terms of two aspects. Firstly, the preferred skill among them and secondly, the comparisons between groups according to individual skills.

As for the preferred skill, it can be seen that both master's and PhD students' choice is in tandem with the overall results. Both chose 'watching' to be their preferred skill in OCLLSs. On the other hand, there is a difference in the choice for male and female respondents. The male respondents also preferred 'watching' but the female respondents chose 'writing' to be their preferred skill.

Table 3 further indicates the comparisons in terms of individual skills, between master's and PhD students, and male and female respondents. For the former, the means for all skills for master's students top those of PhD students. As for the latter, the means for four out of the five skills of female respondents are higher than those of the male respondents. They only lost to their counterparts in 'watching', where the mean for male respondents is 3.17 whereas it is only 3.06 for female respondents.

Scrutinising further into 'watching' as it is the most preferred skill, there are two types of media in the items for 'watching'. Items 15 (*I watch English TV programmes to improve my English*) and 16 (*I watch English movies to improve my English*) show that respondents were asked to respond to two types of media – television programmes and movies. The means are 3.12 and 3.10 respectively. Hence, although more respondents chose to watch television

programmes than movies in improving their English language, there is not much difference in the preference between these two media.

In summary, the findings for RQ 1 reveal that the most preferred skill is ‘watching’. It is also the preferred skill for both Master’s and PhD students. However, between male and female respondents, only the former chose ‘watching’, whereas the latter’s choice is ‘writing’. Further, the master’s students top in all the skills compared to PhD students, while the female respondents’ means are higher in four skills except for ‘watching’. *RQ 2 Which do they prefer; being self-directed, using tools and involving people in their OCLLSs?* RQ 1 answers the question of what skill is preferred. RQ 2, on the other hand, emphasises on how the skill is employed – whether it is being self-directed, involving other people, or utilising tools. Table 3 shows the comparison among the means.

**Table-3.** Comparison of means for how the skills is employed

<b>How</b>	<b>Being self-directed</b>	<b>Involving other people</b>	<b>Utilising tools</b>
Mean	2.94	2.80	2.98

Table 3 shows that the most preferred way to employ OCLLSs among ISs is by utilising tools with the highest mean of 2.98. This is followed by being self-directed and lastly involving other people, with the means of 2.94 and 2.80 respectively.

Below are examples of items from the questionnaire that denote ‘utilising tools’.

I watch English movies to improve my English.

20. I listen to news in English to learn how fluent speakers speak in English.

25. I read English novels/storybooks to improve my English.

27. I look up words I don’t understand in an English-native language dictionary.

34. I make use of computers to learn English.

40. I use spell-checker and grammar-checker to edit my writing in English.

From the samples above, the ‘tools’ that are utilised are mass media such as movies and news; traditional reading materials that include novels/storybooks and dictionary; technology which are mainly computers and features on Microsoft words programme for instance, spelling and grammar checker. Below is the list of items with the 5 highest means with regard to ‘utilising tools’.

<b>No</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1	35. I surf the internet to improve my English.	3.25
2	36. I use digital/online dictionary to look up for the meaning of words in English.	3.24
3	34. I make use of computers to learn English.	3.23
4	40. I use spell-checker and grammar-checker to edit my writing in English.	3.18
5	15. I watch English TV programmes to improve my English.	3.12

All of the tools in the list above are affiliated to technology – internet, digital/online dictionary, computer, spell and grammar-checker, and television. There seems to be an inclination towards technology compared to traditional reading materials like newspapers/magazines (item 24), novels/storybooks (item 25), and hardcopy dictionary (item 27). The means for items 24, 25 and 27 are only 2.90, 2.79 and 2.94, respectively. In short, they do not even reach 3.0. Hence, respondents utilise tools that are up-to-date rather than traditional materials. The most obvious evidence is between hardcopy dictionary and digital or online dictionary. The mean for the former is only 2.94, meanwhile it is 3.24 for the latter. In other words, in performing the task of finding meaning of a word, respondents prefer to use digital or assess online dictionary compared to referring to hardcopy traditional dictionary.

The second preferred way of employing OCLLSs is by being self-directed. It is represented by items stated as below:

6. While speaking in English I think of what I want to say in English without thinking it first in my own language.
9. When speaking in English I think first what I want to say in my own language and then translate it into English.
11. I talk to myself in English.
30. When I meet several new words while reading, I try to guess the meaning from its context.
32. I write down new words that I have learned.

Based on the five sample items above, it can be deduced that 'being self-directed' means doing the learning activities on one's own. It includes thinking, talking, guessing and writing down new words.

In contrast, 'involving other people' refers to activities that include the other individuals in the learning activities. Some of the examples of the individuals involved are seen in the following items:

3. I speak English with my friends out of class in the university.
4. I speak English with other teachers out of class in the university.
5. I get my family/housemates to correct my English at home.
7. If during a conversation in English I failed to understand what someone else has said, I asked for repetition.
19. I listen to my family/housemates speaking English.

Each of the items above show the learning activities done with the assistance or at least involvement of other individuals – friends, teachers, family members and housemates.

The findings for RQ 2 also can be reported in terms of different groups - master's and PhD students, and male and female respondents. Table 4 has the information.

**Table-4.** Comparisons of master's/PhD and male/female for preferred way of OCLLSs employment

	Utilising tools	Being self-directed	Involving people
Master's	3.01	2.97	2.84
PhD	2.97	2.93	2.78
Male	2.97	2.93	2.78
Female	3.02	2.97	2.88

Table 4 shows that the means for all groups – master's and PhD students, and male and female respondents coincide with the main finding for RQ 2. All groups preferred to utilise tools in employing OCLLSs in their English language learning. However, between master's and PhD students, the former has the higher mean in all the three ways of employing OCLLSs. As for the male and female respondents, the latter has the higher mean in all of the three ways.

In summary, the respondents preferred to utilise tools in employing OCLLSs. This is followed by being self-directed and lastly, involving people. Further, all groups – master's and PhD students, and male and female respondents – also chose to utilize tools as their preferred way of employing OCLLSs.

## 6. DISCUSSIONS

The two research questions in this study require the answers concerning the preferred OCLLSs of ISs in one of the institutions in Malaysia. Thus, there are two main findings for this study. Firstly, in the quest of finding the preferred skill in OCLLSs, it was discovered that the ISs preferred 'watching' rather than reading, speaking, listening and writing. Secondly, in choosing the best way to employ OCLLSs, the answer was utilising tools. It is followed by being self-directed and lastly is involving people. This section presents discussions, according to the research question.

The main finding for RQ 1 in this study concurs with the findings in previous studies. In terms of skills, [Pickard \(1996\)](#); [Pearson \(2004\)](#) and [Hyland \(2004\)](#) discovered that the respondents and participants in their studies preferred receptive skills in their out-of-class English language learning. This is in line with the preferred skills in 'watching'.

As mentioned, there are three skills involved in 'watching'. They are visual, listening and reading; respondents see the movie, listen to the dialogues, and read the English subtitles (Noor Saazai, in press), respectively. Visual, listening and reading are all receptive skills. This also goes to say that in terms of location, whether the respondents or participants are in Germany (Pickard, 1996) Hong Kong (Hyland, 2004) New Zealand (Pearson, 2004) or Malaysia (this study), when it comes to strategies used out of classroom environment, they prefer to use receptive skills. Moreover, the preference for receptive skills over productive skills transcends the type or background of the students. This is evidence as the participants in the first two studies by Pickard (1996) and Hyland (2004) are both own nationals studying English in own countries. However, the respondents in this study and those in Pearson (2004) study are international students studying English in foreign countries.

The main finding for RQ 2 reveals that respondents preferred employing OCLLSs by utilising tools. This is in tandem with the main concept of SCT by Vygotsky where mediation happens in learning. Although mediation refers to both entities - people through scaffolding and physical or abstract tools and gadgets; the respondents in this study preferred the latter. Hence, this study is a testimony of the concept of (tools and gadgets) mediation in learning as espoused in SCT and further discussed by Lantolf (2000). Furthermore, it was discussed that among the existing tools and gadgets, the respondents were inclined towards those which are technology-affiliated. This is evinced by their preference for digital and online dictionary rather than hardcopy traditional dictionary. This suggests that with the advent of technology, the students are also evolving with it.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The problem statement, the purpose of the study and the research questions have been addressed by this study and its findings. This study shows that ISs employed OCLLSs in learning English and the investigation further revealed the type and way of OCLLSs preferred. ISs chose to 'watch' which comprises multiple skills rather than singular skills as in writing, reading, listening and speaking. Moreover, they also favoured utilising tools in their OCLLSs compared to being self-directed and involving people.

Based on the two main findings, it can be concluded that ISs take advantage of the advent of technology. This is clearly seen in the preference to watch a television programme or a movie in English and the inclination towards computer and internet in English language learning. Therefore, in creating a more conducive out-of-class environment for ISs to learn English, there is a need to ameliorate the conditions of the environment by having more electronic visuals that air good and interesting English programmes all around the institution, upgrading the availability and speed of internet access, adding more plug points for them to charge their electronic gadgets, and also providing computer terminals in places that they usually get together or even places like post office, bursary, international student centre where they have to wait for their turn to be served.

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