

## EXAMINING THE INTERPLAY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES, GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE, AND WRITING PERFORMANCE IN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION

Dian Septarini<sup>1)\*</sup>, Indah Windra Dwie Agustiani<sup>2)</sup>

<sup>1), 2)</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Palembang

[dian\\_septarini@um-palembang.ac.id](mailto:dian_septarini@um-palembang.ac.id)<sup>1)\*</sup>, [indahwindra@yahoo.com](mailto:indahwindra@yahoo.com)<sup>2)</sup>

### Abstract

This study investigated the relationships among language learning strategies, grammar mastery, and writing achievement among undergraduate students in an English Education program. Employing a correlational design, the study involved 149 students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a questionnaire and a writing test, and analysed through Pearson product-moment correlation and regression analysis. The findings revealed that language learning strategies had no significant relationship with students' writing achievement. In contrast, grammar mastery showed a significant positive relationship and contributed meaningfully to writing performance. Furthermore, when examined simultaneously, language learning strategies and grammar mastery jointly influenced writing achievement; however, only grammar mastery emerged as a significant predictor. These findings suggest that while language learning strategies alone may not directly impact writing outcomes, grammatical competence plays a more substantial role in supporting students' writing achievement in an EFL context.

**Keywords:** *Language Learning Strategies, Grammar Mastery, Writing Essay Achievement*

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### Introduction

Language plays a fundamental role in human communication, enabling individuals to express ideas in both spoken and written forms. In a global context, English functions as an international language that facilitates communication across cultures. However, despite its importance and its inclusion in formal education for several years, English proficiency in Indonesia remains relatively low. A report by EF English First (2011) ranked Indonesia 34th out of 44 countries, indicating that significant improvement is still needed to compete in a globalized world.

In the Indonesian educational context, English instruction is designed to develop four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, writing is often regarded as the most complex skill, as it requires the integration of multiple linguistic and cognitive components. Writing is essential for academic success, particularly in higher education, where students are expected to express ideas clearly, logically, and coherently. As noted by Myles (2002), writing is not a naturally acquired skill but must be learned through continuous practice

and experience. Similarly, Omaggio Hadley (1993) emphasizes that writing involves not only the reproduction of information but also the transformation of ideas into meaningful texts.

Despite its importance, writing remains a challenging skill for many students. Previous studies have shown that students often struggle with writing due to limited practice and an overemphasis on theoretical knowledge rather than actual composition. For instance, Alwasilah (1999, as cited in Sugiharto, 2006) found that a large proportion of students received minimal feedback, while instruction tended to focus more on theory than practice. These conditions contribute to students' difficulties in developing effective writing skills. Preliminary observations in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Palembang reveal that students' performance in writing and grammar courses remains moderate to low. Many students demonstrate difficulties in organizing ideas, maintaining coherence, and applying writing in English.

One key factor that may influence writing performance is grammatical competence. Writing in a foreign language

requires not only the ability to generate ideas but also the ability to organize them using appropriate grammatical structures. According to Biber, Conrad, and Leech (1988), grammar provides a system of choices that enables effective communication in different contexts. However, many students who understand grammatical rules still face difficulties applying them in actual writing, suggesting a gap between knowledge and performance.

In addition to grammar, language learning strategies have been identified as another important factor in language acquisition. Rebecca Oxford (1994) highlights that language learning strategies can enhance learners' ability to process and use language effectively. Empirical studies, such as Ihsan and Diem (1997), have also reported a significant relationship between language learning strategies and English achievement among EFL learners. Nevertheless, findings across studies are not always consistent, indicating the need for further investigation.

The word *strategy* comes from the ancient Greek term *strategia* meaning generalship or the art of war. More specifically, strategy involves the optimal management of troops, ships, or aircraft in a planned campaign. A different, but related, word is *tactics*, which are tools to achieve the success of strategies. The two expressions show some basic implied characteristics: planning, competition, conscious manipulation, and movement toward a goal (Oxford 1990, p.7). Chamot and Kupper (1989) state that successful language learners tend to select strategies that work well together with the requirements of the language task. Learning strategies can also enable students to become more independent, autonomous, lifelong learners (Allwright, 1990). Yet students are not always aware of power of consciously using L2 learning strategies for making learning quicker and more effective (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993).

Oxford's classification of language learning strategies gives much attention to most researchers because Oxford has devised an instrument for assessing the frequency of use of language learning strategies. This instrument is called strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) which has been widely accepted and used in major studies

(Shmais, 2003). SILL is a list of strategies according to Oxford's six categories and it is the most widely used inventory because it allows comparison for the study that's why in this present study Oxford framework in LLS was used (Bremner, 1999).

There are some definitions of grammar quoted from experts. Lado (1961) states that grammar is the study of rules that are claimed to tell the students what he should and should not say in order to speak language of the social educated class (p.141). Having a systematic knowledge of English grammar can help students construct clear, interesting, and precise sentences and paragraphs with their limited vocabulary, can save them much time and help them learn English faster because they can make use of the established rules summarized by our forefathers instead of spending much time trying to find out the rules by themselves, and can also help deepen their language awareness and improve their English day by day (Shen, 2012).

The word *mastery* means great skill or knowledge in a particular subject or activity (Quirk, 1992, p.644). Grammar mastery means that how the speakers utter their ideas which they have in mind using the rules of grammar. A learner can be said as mastering a language (having competences) if s/he fulfills two main requirements, namely *accuracy* (correctness), which refers to the mastery of grammatical structures, and *fluency*, which indicates that the learner can use the target language (Widdowson, 1975). In addition, Harmer (1991) declares that grammatical knowledge is very important for learners who want to have communicative competence. With good understanding on grammatical concepts, learners can avoid the use of incorrect structures (p.22). As it has been mentioned above, that grammar is the rules by which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences, and we can say that mastering grammar plays an important role in how learner can master a language. Therefore, to write or speak in a clearer and more effective manner, people have to study grammar. For the people who have unconscious knowledge of grammar, it may be enough for simple language use. but the people who wish to communicate in the artistic manner with well-defined structures must go for the greater depth of

understanding and proficiency what the study of grammar offers.

Brown (2004) notes the practice of making grammatical transformation in writing or composition-based grammar is very popular. He mentioned that language teachers have used grammatical transformation task technique as an assessment task, ostensibly to measure grammatical competence. Hence, he said the positive side of grammatical transformation task is easy to administer and is quite high in scorer reliability and arguably tap into a knowledge of grammatical forms that will be performed through writing.

Writing is a skill that serves individual's communication needs as well as their learning. As writing skills of students develop, they begin to apply their knowledge to the written expression more and more easily and go beyond what they learnt (Raimes, 1983). Brown (2004) states that in the field of second language teaching, only a half-century ago, experts were saying that writing was primarily a convention for recording speech and for reinforcing grammatical and lexical features of language. Therefore he added we fully understand the difficulty of learning to write "well" in any language even in our own native language (p.218).

The connection between grammar and writing is very important one. the rules of grammar help to govern the way writing takes place, and ensure that it can be easily understood by the people who read it (Miller, 2015). Moreover he also states:

The importance of grammar and writing cannot be overstated. While certain parts of a society may adapt their own dialectal variations as a part of their cultural identity, a failure to also be able to follow the conventional grammar rules will greatly limit a person's opportunity to communicate with a wider audience. Someone may be a very talented writer with a lot of great ideas, but if they have poor grammar,

they will have trouble communicating those ideas to other people.

In an academic context, writing implies the use of standard English and a high concern with accuracy, but from a general perspective, contrary to speaking, accuracy in writing is very important, and effective writing depends primarily on clarity and accuracy (Taylor 1981, Greenbaum 1988, Weigle 2002, Hyland, 2003). The importance of grammar depends also on the distance or closeness between the writer and reader as "a feeling of distance will make the use of well-formed sentences in writing a priority" (Harmer, 2001, p. 248).

In addition, Tarone and Yule (1989) state language proficiency (aptitude) cannot be achieved without a certain level of grammatical competence. They claim that there are no serious and solid grounds to object the role of grammatical competence in proficiency, and it has never really been seriously suggested that any language learner can become proficient in a language without developing a certain level of grammatical competence. (p. 17-18)

Therefore, It is necessary to provide students with strategies that will help them vary their sentences and to shape their ideas particularly by the exploitation of the creative potential of grammar. Successful or failed learning experiences resulting from experimenting with the use of different strategies will help direct learners toward finding the most effective and suitable strategies for themselves. Based on the background, the problems of the study were formulated in the following questions:

1. Was there any significant correlation between language learning strategies and writing essay achievement of English Education Study Program students of Muhammadiyah University Palembang?
2. Was there any significant correlation between grammar mastery and writing essay achievement of English Education Study Program students of Muhammadiyah University Palembang?
3. Was there a significant correlation among Language learning strategy, Grammar Mastery and Writing Essay Achievement of English Education Study

Program students of Muhammadiyah University Palembang?

### Research Design

In this study, a correlational research design was adopted within an explanatory and predictive framework to examine the relationships among the variables and to account for the observed patterns in the data. Students' language learning strategies were measured using a questionnaire, while their writing achievement was assessed through a writing test. Grammar mastery was evaluated based on the same writing task using a standardized assessment rubric. Subsequently, the data were subjected to statistical analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine the strength of associations and the predictive contributions among the variables. The findings were then systematically interpreted to provide a comprehensive explanation of the relationships identified.

There were two kinds of variables in this study, criterion and predictor variables. A criterion variable is an attribute or characteristic that is as an anticipated outcomes or being predicted, and predictor variable is an attribute or characteristic to make a forecast or prediction (Creswell, 2008). In this study, the predictor variables were language learning strategies (X1) and grammar mastery (X2) of English Education Study Program students of Muhammadiyah University Palembang and criterion variable was students' writing achievement (Y).

To give clear description of this study, some terms used are operationally defined. They are (a) language learning strategies refer to as students' behaviors and students' strategies preference by which they can do their best in learning English. Students' language learning strategies will be measured by Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990). There are six classification of language learning strategies. They are *memory strategies*, *cognitive strategies*, *compensation strategies*, *metacognitive strategies*, *affective strategies*, and *social strategies*, (b) grammar mastery refers to students' power to use the correctness of

grammatical structures and fluency of using the target language based on students' writing essay. To measured students' grammar mastery, the researcher used Comprehensive Diagnostic Grammar Assessment Rubric by Stone (2012). Then (c) writing achievement means what students have achieved toward the process of expressing ideas in written communication done successfully. To measure students' writing achievement, the students were given writing test based on the topic with time allocation given by the writer. The researcher used Essay Writing Scoring Rubric for ESL/EFL Students by Jacobs, et al (1981). At last (d) English Study Program students refer to students whose major is English education at University of Muhammadiyah Palembang.

Here the researcher took groups of students who had already taken and passed all the writing subjects (Writing I, Writing II, and Writing III) and all structure subjects (Structure I, Structure II, and Structure III). The groups of students were fourth semester students, sixth semester students, and eight semester students. However, there were only 149 students becoming the sample because some of them, especially the eight-semester students, were graduated already and did not actively go to campus as they did not have any courses to attend and some of them did not attend the class when the researcher distributed the questionnaires and writing test.

The researcher collected three data in this study. They were the questionnaire on students' language learning strategies, students' grammar mastery test, and writing test in order to know students' writing achievement in academic English writing.

Content validity was used to find out the validity of the writing test by having expert judgment. There were 5 evaluated items; instruction, topic, time allocation, content and rubric. The results showed that instruction and rubric were very appropriate, and topic, time allocation and content were appropriate. In brief, the writing test was valid and appropriate to collect the data. However, In the field of ESL and EFL, a lot of studies concerning the use of language learning strategies has been conducted since Oxford's original Strategy Inventory for

Language Learning (SILL) was introduced in 1987 (Ellis, 1994). Therefore, the researcher does not need to re-measure the validity and reliability of the instrument, since it has been used validated many times. To get the reliability of the writing test, inter-rater reliability was used. By using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, the results from each rater were correlated. It showed that there were very strong correlations among them with correlation coefficients .560, .570 and .314 that were significant at 0.01 level.

Normality test and linearity test were conducted prior to data analysis through SPSS. As parametric statistics, in terms of correlation and regression, it was necessary to examine if the distribution of data was normal for each variable and linear between variables. Kolmogorov-Smirnov formula was applied to see the normality. The analysis of the collected data was conducted by using Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient and regression analysis. The first technique was applied to find out whether there were significant correlation between students' language learning strategies and their writing achievement, significant correlation between students' grammar mastery and their writing achievement, significant correlation of students' language learning strategies and grammar mastery to their writing achievement. Stepwise Regression Analysis was used to examine whether or not the students' language learning strategies or each parts of strategies influenced their writing achievement. If there was an influence, further analysis would reveal the best predictor of language learning strategies related to writing achievement. Afterwards, to answer the reasons why the correlation and influence among variables might occur, the results were subsequently interpreted.

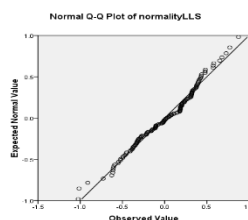
## Results and Discussion

### Results of Normality Test and Linearity Test

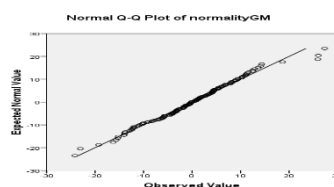
The results indicated that the data from each variable were all normal and appropriate for data analysis with the value of Asymp. Sig. *Language Learning Strategies* is .076, the value of Asymp. Sig.

*Grammar Mastery* is .890, and the value of Asymp. Sig. *Writing Essay Achievement* is .959. The normal Q-Q plot of each variable is illustrated in the following figures:

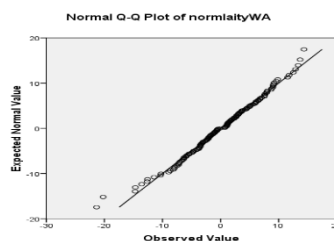
### Distribution of Language Learning Strategies Data



### Distribution of Grammar Mastery Data



### Distribution of Writing Achievement Data



For linearity test, deviation of linearity was obtained. If probability score was more than .05, the two variables were linear. It was revealed that, the deviation from linearity between language learning strategies and writing achievement was .883. Next, the deviation from linearity between grammar mastery and writing achievement was 1.262.

### Result of the Correlation between Students' Language Learning Strategies and Their Writing Achievement

As shown in Table, according to Pearson Product Moment correlation, the result indicated that the correlation coefficient or the *r*-obtained (0.121) was lower than the *r*-table (0.159). Then *p* (0.141) was higher than .05. It means the correlation between students' language learning strategies and

their writing essay achievement was very weak and not significant.

**Table 1** Correlation Students' Language Learning Strategies and Writing Achievement

		Writing Achievement
LLS	Pearson Correlation	.121
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.141
	N	149

According to the statistical calculation result,  $p\text{-value} > \alpha 0.05$ . It means that the students' language learning strategies partially gave very week influence and not significant to the students' writing achievement. The R square value shows that the contribution of the influence is as much as 1.5%.

#### **The Correlation between Students' Grammar Mastery and Their Writing Achievement**

By using Pearson Product Moment correlation, the result indicated that the correlation coefficient or the  $r$ -obtained (0.782) was higher than the  $r$ -table (0.159). Then  $p$  (0.000) was lower than .001. It means that there was positive significant correlation between students' grammar mastery and their writing achievement.

According to the statistical calculation result,  $p\text{-value} (0.000) < \alpha 0.05$ . It means that the students' grammar mastery partially gave positive significant influence to their writing essay achievement. The R square shows that the contribution of the influence is as much as 61.2%.

#### **The Correlation among Students' Language Learning Strategies, Grammar Mastery, and Their Writing Achievement**

By using Pearson Product Moment correlation, it was found that there was no significant correlation between students' language learning strategies and their writing achievement at Sig. .133. In other words, it was found that there was significant correlation between student's grammar

mastery and their writing achievement at Sig. .000.

**Table 2** Students' Language Learning Strategies, Grammar Mastery, and Their Writing Achievement

		WA
LLS	Pearson Correlation	.123
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.133
	N	149
GM	Pearson Correlation	.782**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	149

#### **The Correlation among Students' Language Learning Strategies, Students' Grammar Mastery and Their Writing Achievement**

The students' language learning strategies, and students' grammar mastery simultaneously showed Sig. Value  $0.013 < \alpha 0.05$ . It means that simultaneously both students' language learning strategies and students' grammar mastery give significant influence to their writing achievement. The value of the R square shows that the influence is as much as 62.8%.

#### **DISCUSSION**

According to the findings, there was a weak correlation between students' language learning strategies and their writing achievement and the correlation was not significant. None of the sixth categories of strategies could be the most dominant to influence students' writing essay achievement. In simple words, all the sixth categories of strategies did not give contribution to influence the students' writing essay achievement because the correlation among those six categories to writing essay achievement was in the very weak level and was not significant. The scores of language learning strategies were also varied for each classifications of strategies.

Some factors could also take place due to the weaknesses of the instruments used. Language learning strategies are not always readily observable to the human eye. The

researcher herself found it difficult whether the students honestly answered the questionnaire or not. Beside that, the students may have wrong interpretations of the questions asked, so they just answered spontaneously without really considering all the strategies were appropriate to themselves. Next, why there was very weak correlation between students' language learning strategies and their writing achievement was the student may only think of how to get high score of writing by pretending how they improve their writing skill. They might have difficult to remember strategies and write at the same time. Another reason why the correlation between language learning strategies and writing essay achievement was very weak was the researcher took samples purposively and small scope of samples. It might influence the result of measuring their achievements using the formula of the statistics used.

In addition, Oxford (1990) states that many factors affect the choice of strategies. They are degree of awareness, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectation, age sex, nationality/ethnicity, general learning style, personality traits, motivation level, and purpose for learning the language. Students who are more aware and more advanced seem to use better strategies. Students would not use the same strategies for writing a composition in a specific purpose. Since the samples of this study was from different semester, older students might use somewhat different strategies than younger students. Not only that, more highly motivate students use a significantly greater range of appropriate strategies than do less motivated students. For example, students who want to earn a new language mainly for interpersonal communication will use different strategies than students who want to learn a new language merely to fulfill a graduation requirement. Further, owing to conditioning by the culture and the educational system, many language students are passive. They like to be told what to do, and they do only what is clearly essential to get a good grade although they fail to develop useful skills in the process (Oxford, 1990, p.10).

Unlike the finding of the correlation between students' language learning

strategies and their writing essay achievement, another findings revealed that students' grammar mastery partially had a positive significant correlation to their writing achievement. Irmischer (1979) states that grammar not only makes a person more conscious of stylistic effects but also helps a writer in diagnosis writing problems and explaining them to others. Furthermore, he also states grammarians are not necessarily writers, but writers must always be grammarians, whether they are conscious of what they are doing or not. Another expert, Miller (2015), states that the relationship between grammar and writing is a very important one. Writers with poor grammar may have trouble communicating their ideas. He also adds the rules of grammar are the important aspect because it is a necessary component of learning to write, and it positively or negatively influences the quality of ideas and it helps to govern the mechanics of writing. In line with this findings of this study, from a general perspective, good writing implies partly a good grammatical knowledge and it is important to keep in mind that proper grammar is important to good writing. From all explanation above, language learning strategies was useful in teaching and learning language. This new teaching capacities would change the teachers' role in teaching language. In this process, teachers do not necessarily forsake all their old managerial and instructional tasks, but these elements become much less dominant. These changes strengthen teachers' roles, making them more varied and more creative (Oxford, 1990). Language learning strategies should be applied in longer time in order to give direct effect to the students. The language learning strategies were applicable not only for writing class but also for other skills and other language components even for any other subjects. When students use more strategies in reaching their learning objectives, they would get the better result, and both teachers and students feel more successful.

## Conclusion

Based on results and discussion of the study, there was a weak correlation between students' language learning strategies and

their writing achievement and the correlation was not significant. None of the sixth categories of strategies could be the most dominant to influence students' writing essay achievement. In simple words, all the sixth categories of strategies did not give contribution to influence the students' writing essay achievement because the correlation among those six categories to writing essay achievement was in the very weak level and was not significant. The scores of language learning strategies were also varied for each classifications of strategies. Unlike the finding of the correlation between students' language learning strategies and their writing essay achievement, another findings revealed that students' grammar mastery partially had a positive significant correlation to their writing achievement.

From all explanation above, language learning strategies was useful in teaching and learning language. This new teaching capacities would change the teachers' role in teaching language.

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