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## VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES PREFERENCES AMONG THE POST-UPSR LEARNERS IN KOTA KINABALU, SABAH

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### Abstract:

This study aimed to identify the extent to which vocabulary learning strategies influence the results of English writing in UPSR of the post-UPSR learners. The subjects were 267 high-achievers Form 1 learners from four secondary schools who had completed the UPSR in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The purpose of this study was to determine which VLSs was used the most frequently by the post-UPSR learners. Participants completed a VLS questionnaire and the findings revealed the strategies of vocabulary learning the post-UPSR inclined to employ from each category of determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive. We conclude that while VLSs use should be encouraged in general, instructors may not need to cater to individual vocabulary learning styles.

### Keywords:

Vocabulary Learning Strategies, VLSs, Writing Strategies, High Achiever Learners, Post-UPSR, English Language

## Introduction

Recent research has shown that different learners have different learning styles (Baykan & Naçar, 2007; Hughes, Breckler, Joun & Ngo, 2009; Fallis & Peel, 2009; Bhagat, Vyas & Singh, 2015). Learning strategies refer to the technique by which learners can efficiently grow their knowledge both inside and outside of school if they have skills that initiate, guide, and control the search for information, as well as its subsequent processing and storage (Wegner, Minnaert & Strehlke, 2013). Plus, learners are required to demonstrate greater autonomy and effort in learning processes, such as examining learning materials and able to comprehend content. Hardan (2013) explains that every learning process entails the adaptation of a method or strategy for achieving the primary goal of learning, and the most important aspects of the learning process are the questions of what to use for learning and how to use it. Humans, on the other hand, use a variety of strategies when learning a language; some of these strategies are beneficial, while others are ineffective (Hardan, 2013).

This current study was conducted to identify the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) chosen by post-UPSR learners. The learning strategy of these learners was identified based on their level of achievement in the English writing paper in the UPSR they sat in the final year the exam was conducted, which is 2019. UPSR examinations for 2020 have been cancelled in light of Covid-19, then later been phased out in 2021. The selected respondents consisted of high-achieving learners who had obtained a Grade A in the English writing paper. The purpose of selecting the respondents is to identify the VLSs practiced by the best learners that enable them to get an A in the exam. Therefore, the selected post-UPSR learners were among the Form One learners in 2021 who have just undergone UPSR and have completed their studies in primary school.

Vocabulary is the first and most important knowledge to be taught in the teaching and learning of any language (Easterbrook, 2013). Interaction becomes possible once learners have mastered a certain range of vocabulary because it allows individuals to comprehend what others are meaning to say. They could also convey their emotions and thoughts in the language in which they communicate (Lessard-Clouston, 2013). Wilkins observed that in communication, one can express oneself even without using correct grammar. However, without vocabulary, one may be unable to efficiently convey his thoughts (Lessard-Clouston, 2013).

It is highlighted in Malaysian education, with the Ministry of Education announcing the detachment of English papers in Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR). a standardised primary level examination taken by learners before they complete their primary education. Heretofore, the UPSR English paper was a single paper that combined comprehension and writing. Since 2016, the UPSR English paper has been divided into two papers, one focusing on comprehension and writing. This has raised questions among teachers, parents, and learners about the difficulties of passing two English papers rather than one. Eventually, the UPSR exams were abolished in 2021 and replaced with school-based assessments.

Regardless of the significance of English language in Malaysian education, many learners still struggle with English language proficiency, most of which is caused by a lack of vocabulary (Ghabool, Mariadass & Kashef, 2012). They will have trouble grasping the language if their vocabulary is minimal. This will result in the ability to read, write, listen to, and speak the language. Several methods have been developed to assist learners in improving their English vocabulary.

Vocabulary is critical in the acquisition of the English language, particularly for second language learners. Learning a large vocabulary can help these learners communicate their message more efficiently. A broad vocabulary is an important tool in a writer's toolkit, alongside punctuation, grammar, and a variety of other skills (Ahmed, 2017). In writing, vocabulary can assist learners in communicating the meaning of information in an effective and compelling manner. It will aid writers in choosing the appropriate word for each task and preventing vague words which learners do not understand the exact meaning of (Ahmed, 2017).

Alas, most educators strive to use a time-consuming, teacher-centered learning approach that can obstruct the learning process and make it harder for learners to grasp the subject at hand. Many teachers and educators continue to use the traditional teaching method (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). In consequence, educators should consider applying appropriate strategies and tools (Nosratinia & Adibifar, 2014). After all, teachers' assistance is required in improving learners' writing abilities.

### Literature Review

English proficiency is required if one wishes to advance in life (Nishanthi, 2018). Apparently, English is taught and learned as a subject, with an emphasis on the mechanics of the language rather than finding connections to how it is used in actual life. Academic performance entails meeting the goals, achievements, and objectives established in the programme or course that a learner is enrolled in (Lamas, 2015). The study of Normazidah, Koo, and Hazita (2012) summarised two critical issues in Malaysian English language learning. For starters, the interference of the mother tongue language system, namely Bahasa Malaysia, appears to result in incorrect application of English grammatical rules, morphology, and syntax. When writing in English, learners constantly use their first language, direct translation as well as dictionary definitions to understand English text (Normazidah, Koo & Hazita, 2012).

Various literatures have been reviewed pertaining this phenomenon. It was found that there are empirical studies done on vocabulary learning among primary school students in Malaysia. It is found that a majority of literatures written pertaining vocabulary learning in Malaysia were focused on vocabulary learning strategies among ESL learners. A study was conducted by Ab Rashid (2011) to investigate whether children's stories can be used in developing vocabulary among less proficient secondary school learners. Interviews were conducted to 15 Form Two students (aged 14 years old) and their written accounts in learning diaries were analysed. The duration of the study took nine weeks and it was found that using children's stories helped the less proficient students in their vocabulary. From the analysis of their learning diaries, the study reported that the students were able to use appropriate words as well as correct synonyms and antonyms compared to the first week. As one of the evidences, Ab Rashid (2011) included two samples of a student's writing from Week 1 and Week 5. In Week 1, the student used the word 'neautiful', 'pretty', 'attractive' and 'good-looking' to describe Cinderella, the main character of another children's story entitled Cinderella. These showed that their vocabulary improved by learning English using children's stories. According to the study's analysis of their learning diaries, the learners were able to utilize words as well as accurate synonyms and antonyms compared to the first week. Ab Rashid (2011) included two samples of a learner's writing from Week 1 and Week 5 as evidence. In Week 1, the learner described Cinderella, the main character of another children's story called Cinderella, as 'beautiful,' 'pretty,' 'attractive,' and 'good-looking.' These results demonstrated that learning English through children's stories enhanced their vocabulary.

Ghabool, Mariadass, and Kashef (2012) conducted research on Malaysian writing problems at the secondary school level, analysing essays to determine how many errors they made based on three related aspects: conventions, punctuation, and language use. The results showed that the learners could use synonyms/antonyms and correct grammatical structures, but they struggled to use appropriate language and frequently used L1 words and Bahasa Malaysia sentence patterns in their writings. Furthermore, the study reveals that learners can use SVO (Subject + Verb + Object), SP (Subject + Predicate), and SVA (Subject + Verb + Adverbial) patterns with minimal errors. To sum it up, learners need help with basic vocabulary and grammatical structure.

Furthermore, high achiever learners are those who use learning strategies on a regular basis (Mistar, Zuhairi, & Parlindungan, 2014; Shaumiwaty, 2020). A variety of teaching approaches for teaching writing have been envisioned in research studies on second language writing (Kuntariati & Lailiyah, 2016; Shaumiwaty, 2020), as well as the use of technology to assist learners in writing in a second language (Kuntariati & Lailiyah, 2016; Shaumiwaty, 2020). This study focused mainly on vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) preferred by the learners who had completed the UPSR.

### **Methodology**

This quantitative study centralised on analysing the VLSs most employed by the post-UPSR high achievers in Sabah. The quantitative research seeks to analyse the most preferred strategies of vocabulary learning.

### **Research Participant**

The researchers selected four secondary schools by fixating on learners who got A on the UPSR English writing examination, particularly those from the best schools in Kota Kinabalu. The researchers chose the schools located in Kota Kinabalu because of its proximity to the school that would be studied after the quantitative results are obtained. The actual study conducted by the researchers is multi-method. For the current study, the researchers only focused on one part of quantitative study which is VLSs. Later, the researchers would use the findings of the study to be tested in the form of teaching and learning in a primary school located in the Penampang District which is located close to Kota Kinabalu. The four chosen schools in Kota Kinabalu were identified based on the learners' achievements for the recent years using purposive sampling. Their primary school experiences can testify to the learning strategies they employed in order to achieve the best results on the English Writing paper.

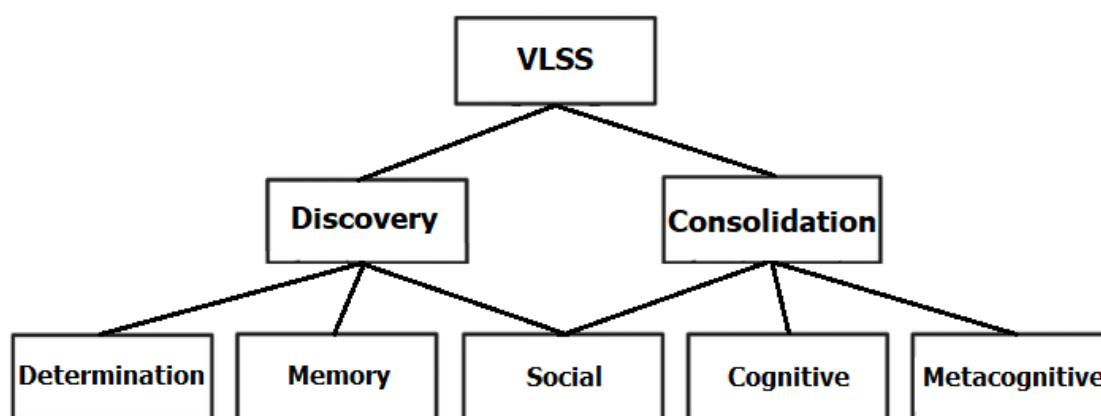
As an outcome, the researchers purposely chose Form One learners as they had just completed the exam the preceding year. Therefore, purposive sampling was used to determine the participant. There were two requirements: firstly, post-UPSR learners who had taken the UPSR exam, and secondly, high achievers who received A in the UPSR, particularly in English writing. The questionnaire was completed by 267 out of 300 respondents who received an 'A' as the highest grade. This is because the purposive sampling requires the researchers to exclude learners who do not represent a specific profile when selecting the sample.

### **Data Collection**

To collect information, a questionnaire was used as the instrument of the study. There are Likert-scale close format question items about the VLSQ, and an open format question asking if the learners have used any other VLSs that were not included in the

questionnaire. These questionnaires were distributed to 267 Form 1 high achiever learners. The method of data collection was questionnaires that gather quantitative data from subjects at the selected schools by hand instead of digital form. The questions consist of open-ended and close-ended questions.

However, this study only concentrates on the close-ended part which uses likert scales. The VLSQ, which consists of 44 items, was adapted from Aljdee, A.A. (2011), whose taxonomy is primarily based on Schmitt's (1997) VLSs taxonomy, which was organised based on Oxford's (1990) social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive categories. Schmitt's taxonomy includes 58 VLSs that are divided into two categories: discovery strategies (useful for the initial discovery of a word's meaning) and consolidation strategies (useful for remembering that word once it has been introduced). These strategies are further classified into five categories, with the discovery category including determination and social strategies, and the consolidation category including social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies as follows:



**Figure 1: Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy**

### **Data Analysis**

The questionnaire data was analysed with the SPSS statistics software programme, which covered (1) the frequency and percentage of sample descriptions, as well as measures of the degree of similarity or overlap in the data, (2) the Cronbach's Alpha for the degree of correlation between the variables, the reliability of the questionnaire, and the degree of correlation between the variables, and (3) the Likert-scale. Finally, the learning strategies with the highest average are the primary learning strategies used by high achiever language learners. In this paper, the findings would only display the third purpose I.e. the results of Likert-scale of the VLSs.

### **Findings**

The 5-point scale from 'Never', 'Rarely', 'Sometimes', 'Usually' to 'Always' were used in the questionnaire of vocabulary learning strategies. This questionnaire was adapted from Aljdee, A.A. (2011), whose taxonomy of VLSs is centred on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy, which in turn is based on Oxford's (1990) social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive categories. Schmitt's taxonomy contains 58 VLSs that are divided into two categories: discovery strategies (useful for the initial discovery of a word's meaning) and consolidation strategies (useful for remembering that word once it has been introduced). Following that, these strategies are divided into five categories, with the discovery category including determination and social



strategies and the consolidation category including social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. The results of the questionnaire were elaborated as follows:

### ***Determination Strategies***

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**Table 1: Determination Strategies**

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Identify the part of speech of the new word to know its meaning.	2 1.4%	17 11.6%	53 36.1%	45 30.6%	29 19.7%
Break the new word up into the main parts.	22 15.0%	47 32.0%	31 21.1%	31 21.1%	16 10.9%
Check for Malay words that are similar in form and meaning to the new word.	15 10.2%	19 12.9%	36 24.5%	41 27.9%	36 24.5%
Analyse any available pictures to understand new words.	9 6.1%	20 13.6%	46 31.3%	42 28.6%	30 20.4%
Analyse any available gestures to understand new words.	22 15%	41 27.9%	39 26.5%	27 18.4%	18 12.2%
Use a bilingual dictionary (English / Malay).	11 7.5%	19 12.9%	27 18.4%	34 23.1%	56 38.1%
Use a bilingual dictionary (Malay / English).	10 6.8%	22 15%	27 18.4%	31 21.1%	57 38.8%
Use a monolingual Dictionary (English / English).	27 18.4%	20 13.6%	40 27.2%	39 26.5%	19 12.9%
Guess the meaning of the new word from the context in which it occurs.	6 4.1%	22 15%	47 32%	43 29.3%	27 18.4%

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage for determination strategies based on all responses. For the strategy 'identify the part of speech of the new word to know its meaning', majority of the learners sometimes use the strategy (36.1%). For the strategy 'break the new word up into the main parts', majority of the learners (32.0%) rarely use the strategy. For the strategy 'check for Malay words that are similar in form and meaning to the new word', most of the learners (27.9%) usually use the strategy. For the strategy 'analyse any available pictures to understand new words', majority of the learners (31.3%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'analyse any available gestures to understand new words', majority of the learners (27.9%) rarely use the strategy. For the strategy 'use a bilingual dictionary (English/Malay)', most of the learners (38.1%) always use the strategy. For the strategy 'use a bilingual dictionary (Malay/English)', majority of the learners (38.8%) always use the strategy. For the strategy 'use a monolingual Dictionary (English/English)', most of the learners (27.2%) sometimes use the strategy. Finally for the strategy 'guess the meaning of the new word from the context in which it occurs', majority of the learners (32%) sometimes use the strategy.

**Social Strategies**

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**Table 2: Social Strategies**

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Ask teacher for translation of the new word into Malay.	13 8.8%	30 20.4%	42 28.6%	43 29.3%	19 12.9%
Ask teacher for a paraphrase of the new word.	21 14.3%	42 28.6%	45 30.6%	28 19.0%	11 7.5%
Ask teacher for a sentence including the new word.	7 4.8%	31 21.1%	46 31.3%	43 29.3%	19 12.9%
Ask teacher for the word lists used whether they are accurate.	10 6.8%	31 21.1%	38 25.9%	34 23.1%	33 22.4%
Ask classmates for the meaning of the new word.	1 .7%	12 8.2%	36 24.5%	50 34.0%	48 32.7%
Discover new meanings through group work activity.	5 3.4%	16 10.9%	53 36.1%	30 20.4%	43 29.3%
Study and practice meaning of the new words in a group of learners.	10 6.8%	25 17.0%	46 31.3%	39 26.5%	27 18.4%

The table above shows the frequency and percentage for social strategies based on all responses. For the strategy 'ask teacher for translation of the new word into Malay', majority of the learners (29.3%) usually use the strategy. For the strategy 'ask teacher for a paraphrase of the new word', majority of the learners (30.6%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'ask teacher for a sentence including the new word', most learners (31.3%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'ask teacher for the word lists used whether they are accurate', most learners (25.9%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'ask classmates for the meaning of the new word', most learners (34.0%) usually use the strategy. For the strategy 'discover new meanings through group work activity', most learners (36.1%) sometimes use the strategy. Finally for the strategy 'study and practice meaning of the new words in a group of learners', most learners (31.3%) sometimes use the strategy.

**Memory Strategies**

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**Table 3: Memory Strategies**

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Make a picture in mind of the new word's meaning.	3 2.0%	20 13.6%	38 25.9%	43 29.3%	43 29.3%
Study the spelling of the new word.	1 .7%	14 9.5%	22 15.0%	48 32.7%	62 42.2%
Study the part of speech of the new word to remember it.	8 5.4%	32 21.8%	43 29.3%	41 27.9%	22 15.0%
Connect the new word to a personal experience.	12 8.2%	21 14.3%	39 26.5%	48 32.7%	27 18.4%
	11	30	51	38	17

Paraphrase the meaning of the word in another way.	7.5%	20.4%	34.7%	25.9%	11.6%
Study the sound of the new word.	8	21	34	44	40
	5.4%	14.3%	23.1%	29.9%	27.2%
Associate the new word with its coordinates.	35	34	31	33	12
	23.8%	23.1%	21.1%	22.4%	8.2%
Say the new word aloud when studying.	33	31	40	20	23
	22.4%	21.1%	27.2%	13.6%	15.6%
Connect the new word to its synonyms and antonyms.	21	38	38	39	10
	14.3%	25.9%	25.9%	26.5%	6.8%
Learn the words of an idiom together.	23	40	49	21	14
	15.6%	27.2%	33.3%	14.3%	9.5%
Make an image in mind of the form of the new word.	6	25	44	39	33
	4.1%	17.0%	29.9%	26.5%	22.4%
Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives.	28	25	51	29	14
	19.0%	17.0%	34.7%	19.7%	9.5%
Use the Keyword Method.	13	27	31	36	40
	8.8%	18.4%	21.1%	24.5%	27.2%
Use the new word in sentences.	1	14	38	47	47
	.7%	9.5%	25.9%	32.0%	32.0%

The table above shows the frequency and percentage for memory strategies based on all responses. For the strategy 'make a picture in mind of the new word's meaning', most learners with a same proportion (29.3%) usually and always use the strategy. For the strategy 'study the spelling of the new word', most learners (42.2%) always use the strategy. For the strategy 'study the part of speech of the new word to remember it', most learners (29.3%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'connect the new word to a personal experience', most learners (32.7%) usually use the strategy. For the strategy 'paraphrase the meaning of the word in another way', most learners (34.7%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'study the sound of the new word', most learners (29.9%) usually use the strategy. For the strategy 'associate the new word with its coordinates', most learners (23.8%) never use the strategy. For the strategy 'say the new word aloud when studying', most learners (27.2%) sometimes use the strategy.

Next, for the strategy 'connect the new word to its synonyms and antonyms', most learners (26.5%) usually use the strategy. For the strategy 'learn the words of an idiom together', most learners (33.3%) sometimes use this strategy. For the strategy 'make an image in mind of the form of the new word', most learners (29.9%) sometimes use this strategy. For the strategy 'use 'scales' for gradable adjectives', most learners (34.7%) sometimes use this strategy. For the strategy 'use the Keyword Method', most learners (27.2%) always use this strategy. Finally, for the strategy 'use the new word in sentences', the high percentage of learners with an equal proportion (32.0%) usually and always use this strategy.



**Cognitive Strategies**

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**Table 4: Cognitive Strategies**

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Repeat the new word over and over.	2	26	47	30	42
	1.4%	17.7%	32.0%	20.4%	28.6%
Write the new word many times.	22	44	38	26	17
	15.0%	29.9%	25.9%	17.7%	11.6%
Make own lists of new words.	39	26	36	26	19
	26.5%	17.7%	24.5%	17.7%	12.9%
Keep a vocabulary notebook for expanding rehearsal.	32	27	40	19	29
	21.8%	18.4%	27.2%	12.9%	19.7%
Take notes of the newly learned words in class.	9	24	30	38	46
	6.1%	16.3%	20.4%	25.9%	31.3%

The table above shows the frequency and percentage for cognitive strategies based on all responses. For the strategy 'repeat the new word over and over', most learners (32.0%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'write the new word many times', most learners (29.9%) rarely use the strategy. For the strategy 'make own lists of new words', most learners (24.5%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'keep a vocabulary notebook for expanding rehearsal', most learners (27.2%) sometimes use the strategy. Finally, for the strategy 'take notes of the newly learned words in class', most learners (31.3%) always use the strategy.

**Metacognitive Strategies**

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**Table 5: Metacognitive Strategies**

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Watching English TV channels.	2	7	16	28	94
	1.4%	4.8%	10.9%	19.0%	63.9%
Using computer programs.	1	16	25	28	77
	.7%	10.9%	17.0%	19.0%	52.4%
Listening to English radio programs.	4	20	23	29	71
	2.7%	13.6%	15.6%	19.7%	48.3%
Reading English newspapers and magazines.	11	34	37	26	38
	7.5%	23.1%	25.2%	17.7%	25.9%
Revise the newly learned words soon after the lesson session.	8	36	30	47	26
	5.4%	24.5%	20.4%	32.0%	17.7%
Continue to review the word over time.	13	29	59	32	14
	8.8%	19.7%	40.1%	21.8%	9.5%
Revise the newly learned words using spaced repetition.	16	30	39	39	23
	10.9%	20.4%	26.5%	26.5%	15.6%
Skip the new word.	30	48	48	18	3

	20.4%	32.7%	32.7%	12.2%	2.0%
Try to assess own vocabulary knowledge.	15	24	53	36	17
	10.2%	16.3%	36.1%	24.5%	11.6%

The table above shows the frequency and percentage for metacognitive strategies based on all responses. For the strategy 'watching English TV channels', most learners (63.9%) always use the strategy. For the strategy 'using computer programs', most learners (52.4%) always use the strategy. For the strategy 'listening to English radio programs', most learners (48.3%) always use the strategy. For the strategy 'reading English newspapers and magazines', most learners (25.9%) always use the strategy. For the strategy 'revise the newly learned words soon after the lesson session', most learners (32.0%) usually use the strategy. For the strategy 'continue to review the word over time', most learners (40.1%) sometimes use the strategy. For the strategy 'revise the newly learned words using spaced repetition', most learners (26.5%) both sometimes and usually use the strategy. For the strategy 'skip the new word', most learners (32.7%) both never and rarely use the strategy. Finally, for the strategy 'try to assess own vocabulary knowledge', most learners (36.1%) sometimes use the strategy.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

A lack of vocabulary knowledge may have an impact on the target learners' not only writing but also reading, listening, and speaking skills. Therefore, it is important to improve learners vocabulary and guide them to use the strategies which were proven as useful based on the experiences of the previous learners. This study presumed that the high achiever post-UPSR learners were aware of their vocabulary learning strategy preferences. The results of the study were identified and based on each category in the analysis of the questionnaire.

As recommendations of the study, it is critical to focus on the learning strategies used by high achiever language learners during their primary school years in order to increase learning strategy knowledge and competency for other primary school learners. The VLSs used by the high achiever learners in this study could provide substantial evidence for other learners, allowing them to set a better phase of learning for themselves in achieving beneficial and better English learning, particularly in improving their skills of writing. Learners who received an A on the UPSR English writing examination should be aware of what strategies work best for themselves in learning English. In a nutshell, the learners' learning strategies in this study could serve as a model for other language learners pursuing the learning objectives.

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