

## EFL STUDENTS' LEARNING STRATEGIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL SCHOOL SETTINGS

Soni Ariawan

English Lecturer, English Language Education Study Program, Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, Indonesia

Corresponding Author Email: [soniariawan@uinmataram.ac.id](mailto:soniariawan@uinmataram.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACTS

The present research is a descriptive quantitative research design using a survey method. There are 30 items adapted and modified from the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) theory used to measure students' strategies in learning English. There are two senior high school (SMA) and 2 junior high school (SMP) contexts or equivalent as the subject of this research, namely students who study in the city of Mataram (urban school setting) and outside the city of Mataram (rural school setting). There were 112 students who participated in this study. Data analysis was carried out by calculating the total score of each question to determine the percentage level of relevance of the statement to the student's condition. The results of this study indicate that the English learning strategies of students in the city and outside the city are almost the same where they use the six learning strategies. Affective strategies and metacognitive strategies remained as the most favorable learning strategies for the EFL students.

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### INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 pandemic has transformed classroom into virtual learning that enable students and teachers interact remotely. The learning process is brought as what it is in the offline classroom. However, it feels different as the teacher cannot directly build an interactive communication with students. It is limited to the internet and tools. Sometimes, teachers have designed such amazing lesson plans and materials, but the students find the signal weak or have no sufficient internet access and many other technical reasons that force them not to join the class. In addition, sometimes, learning is interrupted due to the noise coming up from students who activate their voices but forget to situate their learning environment. Not to mention when the teacher is explaining material where students mute and switch off the video without any voice and response till the end of learning. All of these facts are experienced by almost entire teachers during remote teaching in Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, Indonesian teachers are accustomed to offline learning interaction, so some of them face difficulties to find appropriate ICT for online learning activities, learning media, and learning assessment (Nursalina & Fitriwati, 2021). It is in line with the students' condition, where they learn in different way depending on the learning environment (Syarifudin & Rahmat, 2021) and

teachers' performance. In this moment, students should be able to adjust as well as select the most appropriate learning strategy toward successful learning (Nguyen & Terry, 2017).

On the other hand, teachers have such big responsibilities to conduct joyful, fun, and effective learning (Rahman & Hatomi, 2021). They should act as facilitators who facilitate and serve a conducive learning environment because the study identified that discomfort and frustration can be experienced by the students due to the lack of enjoyment in the classroom (Dewaele et al., 2019). The environment may influence students' attitudes toward learning a foreign language as what Spolsky (1969) found in his study in America that there was a significant relationship between students' attitudes toward learning and their grades.

The phenomena of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic above show how mental and technical readiness is crucial to design an effective online classroom (Fitri et al., 2021). However, disparity lays among those teachers teaching in urban and rural settings. Mentioning technical readiness, it is about the availability of internet access and a computer or at least a smartphone as a tool to learn. It is assumed that schools in rural areas may take these problems into account as a significant one. It is due to the fact that most of students cannot access sufficient signals to be actively involved in online learning. It might be different with schools in urban settings. Some schools have allocated some budget to provide internet and tools both for teachers and students. They build their own website and apply certain learning management systems.

Effective learning can be realized through a supportive collaboration between teachers and students. Teachers have to utilize an appropriate approach and strategy in teaching, while students might employ a particular strategy that fits them depending on their preferences and favor. The question raised then how do students learn during Covid-19 pandemic? What kind of strategies do they employ? Are there any differences, in terms of learning strategy, between those studying in urban and rural school settings? Investigating and comparing how students in urban and rural settings have been learning during Covid-19 pandemic is an interesting part of ELT research. The current study aims to find out how senior high school students perceive online English learning, especially in terms of the utilization of learning strategy. The present research is pivotal to know how significant the difference is between English learning strategies used by the pupils in urban and rural settings.

Urban area is closely connected to the area that is surrounded by the cities. It is also more populated area compared to rural area which is usually full of farmland or country areas (Knoblauch & Chase, 2015). Most updated educational research has investigated students' achievement in rural and urban and it was found that both students' characteristics were different. Many educators, researchers, legislators, and the general public believe that students from rural schools mostly receive an education that is inferior compared to the students that live in urban areas. Many factors lead to this condition. It could be a lack of facilities, low-income family background, lack of teachers' quality, and many other related factors. From his research, Hossain (2016) reveals that 30% lack of facilities such as a library, 40% insufficient books collection, and 30% unavailability of quality books tend to influence the learning quality, as well as in the context of English learning. This clearly indicates that only students who have high motivation to achieve success will learn harder and more seriously compared to those who just feel not confident and inferior to the environment. Another study has been conducted by A'ling (2015) that found rural schools often find some challenges, such as a deficit of supplementary teaching materials, teachers shortages, low professionalism of teachers, insufficiency of technology devices for learning, etc.

Furthermore, urban schools often represents a diverse population of students from a variety of cultural, religious, socio-economic class, and ethnic background. The problem of violence and poverty may give challenges for urban education. They are also afraid of the

neighborhoods where they work (Murrel, 2017). In the context of teaching English in rural areas, it has different challenge from teaching English in urban areas. The challenges are related to the students, teachers, and facilities of the schools (Endriyati et al., 2019).

However, during a critical time of covid-19 pandemic, the educational system and policy in Indonesia have employed virtual teaching as the main mode in the learning system. It has remained the most crucial demand in different countries. Consequently, teachers are trying to familiarize virtual teaching around the world, as it requires more effort than conventional teaching. The rise of virtual teaching goes hand in hand with the development of technology. Computer technology has its own way to present audio-visual information that eases language teachers in creating a multimedia-based classroom in teaching conceptual objects and linguistics (Mathew & Halpin, 2002). It requires the teacher's well-prepared material and strategy to process online learning. The quality of virtual teaching strongly lays on the teachers' behaviour which might lead to learning success.

There are several good points of online learning in the era of Covid-19 pandemic. A study found that online learning is useful since it has no time zones, location, and distance, in asynchronous online learning. It means that online materials are available anytime, while synchronous online learning requires direct communication between students and teacher, so the students can use the internet to access up-to-date and relevant learning materials and can communicate with experts in the field which they are studying (Kanuka & Anderson, 2007). The benefits of online learning are in line with the distance learning theory that has attracted many researchers' eagerness amidst Covid-19 outbreak (Bradley et al., 2020). It means that the freedom of learning is aligned with every single student's style of learning. They will learn in the best way they are able to learn that influence a conducive learning environment. Distance learning also introduces relationships and interaction between students who work individually and those who love to work in a team.

Apart from its advantages, online learning has full of problems and challenges. According to Almosa (2002), there are several drawbacks of teaching online where the learners might experience contemplation, remoteness, as well as lack of communicative interaction, less effective due to the unclear explanation from the teachers. In addition, teachers find it difficult to design activities and assessment which is fair with no plagiarism. A recent study by Baticulon et al. in Karaeng & Simanjuntak (2021) found several problems in e-learning including external problems such as family, institutional, and community. While the internal problems relate to the students' personality and technical problems deal with the availability and accessibility of technology. Furthermore, the finding of the research confirms that only 41% of students successfully situate themselves both physically & mentally in the online learning environment.

Another impact of online learning is the change in students' learning strategies. Language cannot be separated from the meaning and context as well as the media used. This would impact the various learning strategies used by the students which it really depends on the environment (Gerami & Baighlou, 2011). The strategy seems one of the factors that determine the success of learning. Rubin (1975) argued that there are three types of strategies that play a crucial role to succeed the learning: learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. Gerami & Baighlou (2011) found that the use of variety of strategies in English language learning determines the students' learning success compared to those who preferred to use fewer strategies.

O'Malley et al., (1985) divided Language Learning Strategies (LLS) into three main categories: metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. More comprehensively, Oxford (1990) distinguished between indirect and direct strategies. Direct strategies require the mental process of the target language. There are three main groups of direct strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Each group of strategies

addresses the language differently and for different purposes. On the other hand, indirect strategies manage and support the learning of language more frequently without directly involving the target language.

In addition, there are three groups of indirect strategies: metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Further explanation is provided by Malpartida (2021) that memory strategies are defined as the memory storage to access the information either in short or long term and it is used when necessary. Cognitive strategies are the approach of learning when the information is written or taken in notes as part of concept elaboration. On the other hand, compensation strategies deal with the strategy to narrow or overcome the use of mother tongues or body language in expressing the idea. Metacognitive strategies are to plan and organize the language learning process. In addition, affective strategies contribute to manage the attitudes and emotions in the individual process. Finally, social strategies are about communication and cooperation in the learning process.

Gani et al. (2018) modified Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire developed by Oxford. There are 30 statements that represent six of Oxford's learning strategies. The present study employs an instrument developed by Gani et.al (2018) as it widely covers the element of students' learning strategies and presented in the form of such clear statements. This will ease respondents to properly select the displayed statement according to their context.

A number of previous studies have confirmed a positive relationship among LLS use and language proficiency, attitude and motivation (Habók & Magyar, 2018). Successful English learners were likely employ all six categories of strategies in a highly frequency than those unsuccessful ones (Mega et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is claimed that successful learners are able to set an obvious goal, review, evaluate, and control their learning. Thus it enables them to easily think, memorize, summarize, and repeat the learning. The effectiveness of the learning strategy is not only found in the general English classroom context but also more specifically in writing training (Yulianti, 2018), speaking and listening (Zou & Lertlit, 2022) as well as IELTS classes (Damanik, 2022).

As noted by Alhaysony (2017), students involved in an English class mostly employed both metacognitive and cognitive strategies, while affective and memory are not frequently used. However, most studies extensively examined the utilization of almost all strategies when it comes to the students' strategy in learning English. There is a limited number of studies that revealed the affective strategy as the most favorable learning strategy, especially in the case of Thai students (Sukyng, 2021) or in the same context, Thai students, compensation strategies remained as the most frequently used strategy by the students (Zou & Lertlit, 2022). However, it is an undeniable fact from previous findings that metacognitive strategies were dominantly selected by the students (Hapsari, 2019). In a similar vein, a study in another country such as Iran also depicted the same result where metacognitive was the most favorable strategy employed by the students, while cognitive strategy remained as the least frequently used strategy (Salahshour et al., 2013). Furthermore, statistical data also reported the high frequency of metacognitive strategy used by the students that is beneficial to increase students' learning awareness as well as widen teachers' teaching preferences (Lestari & Fatimah, 2020). In addition, Alfian (2021) more specifically mentioned the form of practicing strategies, rather than using metacognitive strategies term in his findings, such as watching TV/ English Movies, using the internet, etc.

Some suggest that students should have an appropriate language learning strategies as it has a positive relationship with students' awareness (Damanik, 2022) and students' achievement or language proficiency (Hardan, 2013) either in face-to-face or online learning (Sugiarta et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers play a very pivotal role to engage and involve students more actively in practicing particular language strategies (Rianto, 2021). Thus, the

present research focuses the effort on investigating students' differences on applying learning strategy during critical period of Covid-19 pandemic. It is an interesting part of learning strategy research due to the significant effect of Covid-19 pandemic on education which consequently change not only the way teacher teach but also the way students learn.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The present study aims to investigate EFL students' learning strategies during Covid-19 pandemic. To gain the data comparison between urban and rural school settings, the researcher determines the school samples and distributes online surveys for their students. The research method started with questionnaire items development by utilizing SILL's theory modified by Gani et al. (2018) where there were 30 statements indicating such a strategy.

### **Research Design**

The present study is part of a quantitative-descriptive study that investigates students' language learning strategies in online learning during Covid-19 pandemic. A survey study is conducted to collect the students' learning strategies utilized during online learning. The items were developed using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 that indicates the level of relevancy between the statements and students' learning strategies. The finding is presented in the table describing the percentage of the use of particular strategies and the result of the coding and labeling process in form of quantitative-descriptive data.

### **Population and Sample**

The population of the research subjects are senior high school students in West Nusa Tenggara province, Indonesia. The sample were 112 students taken from two senior high schools and 2 junior high schools in Mataram representing urban school setting and West Lombok and Central Lombok representing rural school setting. Schools located in Mataram city is state school that has complete facilities due to sufficient funding provided by government and they consistently improve their quality both in school management and output. On the other hand, schools located in urban region is private schools that is managed by a foundation and still face challenges dealing with school facilities, students recruitment as well as school financial management.

### **Instruments**

There are 30 items of the questionnaire adapted from Gani et al. (2018) and distributed to the students in the schools located in urban and rural regions. The items comprise six learning strategies: memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, affective and social. Every strategy has 5 statements where students might select the statement based on their preferences.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analysed quantitatively and displayed in the form of a table describing the frequency and percentage of each questionnaire item. The mean of each strategy was also highlighted to find out the most frequently-used strategy.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The present section elaborates on the finding in terms of the most commonly used language learning strategies by students both in urban and rural school settings. It seems to be a comparative study where differences and similarities can be identified. In addition, students' learning resources are also presented after analyzing their responses on how they

learn English during online learning. Lastly, a variety of problems experienced by students during online learning is also revealed in the present research.

Memory strategies are defined as memory storage of information consciously in the short and long term, and its subsequent use when necessary. There are 5 statements prescribed in the questionnaires to identify students' memory strategies in learning English language. The finding reveals that students from both urban and rural school settings tend to learn English language by using memory strategies (more than 40% of respondents, according the mean percentage in table 1), especially by checking online and offline dictionary when new difficult words are found. The strategy used is also appropriate due to the nature of millennial that spends many hours online. It is easy for them to just go to find the meaning of an unfamiliar word. In contrast, most of them do not learn English language by remembering the words location.

Table 1  
Memory Strategies Used by Urban And Rural School Students

Statement	Disagree		Pair		Agree	
	U	R	U	R	U	R
I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them	10%	14%	43%	26%	47%	60%
I look for new English words in either online or offline dictionary	11%	14%	10%	20%	78%	66%
I use flashcards to remember new English words	46%	32%	26%	37%	28%	32%
I review English lessons often	22%	14%	38%	40%	40%	46%
I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page or on the board	55%	40%	19%	34%	25%	25%
Mean	29%	23%	27%	31%	44%	46%

Another strategy selected by the students is cognitive strategies. It is related to the condition where learners write and take notes to elaborate the concepts. In terms of cognitive strategies, students in urban and rural school settings frequently learn English language by watching TV programs, movies, or videos in English. It is more than 70% of them rate 4 and 5 which indicates a strong agreement on the statement. They also put writing new English words as other activities belong to cognitive strategies utilized during online learning. On the other hand, both students in urban and rural school settings clearly indicate that they seldom use translation strategy and reading article as the strategy in learning English.

Table 2  
Cognitive Strategies Used by Urban And Rural School Students

Statement	Disagree		Pair		Agree	
	U	R	U	R	U	R
I say or write new English words several times	16%	12%	26%	14%	58%	74%
I watch English language TV shows, movies, or videos spoken in English	2%	9%	9%	20%	88%	71%
I like reading English articles	17%	40%	35%	17%	47%	43%
I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English	29%	29%	37%	31%	34%	40%
I try not to translate word-for-word when I read English articles	35%	40%	28%	14%	36%	46%
Mean	20%	26%	27%	19%	53%	55%

The third strategy proposed by Oxford (1990) was compensation strategies. It focuses on reducing or overcoming gaps in the use of the new language, such as the use of the mother tongue, the use of gestures in order to express ideas. It is clearly revealed in the table that most students both in urban and rural school settings use cognitive strategies by trying to find different words that have the same meaning rather than guessing or using gestures. However, others also confirmed that guessing can be an alternative activity used when they find unfamiliar words in reading activities.

Table 3  
Compensation Strategies Used by Urban School Students

Statement	Disagree		Pair		Agree	
	U	R	U	R	U	R
To understand unfamiliar English words in reading, I make guesses	16%	25%	31%	23%	53%	52%
When I can't think of a word during an English conversation, I use gestures	34%	48%	28%	17%	39%	34%
I try to guess the other person will say next in an English conversation	35%	34%	32%	31%	32%	34%
I read English without looking up every new word	38%	23%	41%	29%	21%	48%
If I can't think of an English word during conversation, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing	12%	14%	15%	23%	74%	63%
Mean	27%	29%	29%	25%	44%	46%

Next strategy is metacognitive strategies which obviously deal with planning and organizing the process of language learning. It is found that students in urban and rural schools more dominantly prefer to pay attention to the counterpart when speaking and they try to take mistakes into account as feedback for improvement.

Table 4  
Metacognitive Strategies Used by Urban And Rural School Students

Statement	Disagree		Pair		Agree	
	U	R	U	R	U	R
I try to find as many ways as I can to practice my English speaking skill	1%	12%	15%	11%	83%	77%
I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better	0%	12%	15%	9%	85%	80%
I pay attention when someone is speaking English	2%	9%	10%	11%	87%	80%
I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English	47%	40%	31%	34%	22%	25%
I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English	23%	31%	26%	34%	50%	34%
Mean	15%	21%	19%	20%	65%	59%

Another strategy is affective strategies that enable the learners to manage the individual emotions and attitudes before involving in the social group. In learning English, the majority of students in urban and school settings confirm that they feel very proud and relieved when they are able to speak English. However, it is also found that some of them are still feeling nervous when speaking English.

Table 5  
Affective Strategies Used by Urban School Students

Statement	Disagree		Pair		Agree	
	U	R	U	R	U	R
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of speaking English	10%	26%	22%	14%	67%	60%
I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake	4%	9%	26%	20%	69%	72%
I feel relief and proud when I do well in English	0%	6%	3%	11%	97%	83%
I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying English	16%	31%	18%	14%	67%	54%
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English	32%	43%	25%	17%	43%	40%
Mean	12%	23%	19%	15%	69%	62%

Lastly, social strategies allow interaction and cooperation with other individuals in the learning process. There are two kinds of social strategies that tend to be practiced by both students in urban and rural school settings. They need to ask the teachers or peers in correcting and checking their speaking. Furthermore, during the conversation, they also sometimes ask the speakers to slow down their speaking fluency as well as ask him/her to repeat the sentences.

Table 6  
Social Strategies Used By Urban and Rural School Students

Statement	Disagree		Pair		Agree	
	U	R	U	R	U	R
If I do not understand something in English. I ask other person to slow down or say it again	10%	12%	16%	17%	74%	72%
I ask someone (teacher or friend) to correct my mistakes when I speak English	7%	12%	13%	23%	80%	66%
I practice English with other students	20%	20%	35%	14%	45%	66%
I ask questions in English	24%	25%	41%	34%	35%	40%
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers	40%	35%	31%	26%	30%	40%
Mean	20%	21%	27%	23%	53%	57%

To make the data more readable, the following table is provided to disseminate the data from six tables indicating the percentage for each strategy. It is clearly found that both students in urban and rural school settings employed affective strategies with 66%, followed by the use of metacognitive strategy with 62% and social strategy with 55%. While, the students did not frequently use, less than 50%, memory, cognitive and compensation strategy compared to other strategies.

Table 7  
Summary of percentage of the strategies

Learning Strategy	Urban	Rural	Mean
Memory Strategy	44%	46%	45%
Cognitive Strategy	36%	46%	41%
Compensation Strategy	44%	46%	45%
Metacognitive Strategy	65%	59%	62%
Affective Strategies	69%	62%	66%
Social Strategies	53%	57%	55%

The findings from the data table indicate that students, irrespective of their school setting (urban or rural), primarily employ affective strategies (66%) when engaging in learning activities. This suggests that emotions, motivation, and attitudes play a significant role in their learning processes (Malpartida, 2021). Furthermore, affective learning strategy is significantly effective toward self-successful learners (Bown, 2006). However, this finding is contradictive with study in Thai (Sukyng, 2021) that revealed affective strategy as the most favorable strategy for students. Alhaysony (2017) also states different idea where affective and memory strategies are not frequently used.

In addition, metacognitive strategies (62%) are also prominently used, indicating that students are aware of their thinking and learning processes, reflecting a higher level of self-regulation and planning. The social strategy (55%) holds a substantial presence, implying that collaboration and interpersonal interactions are crucial for their learning experiences. However, the less frequent use of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies (all below 50%) suggests that students may not rely heavily on these approaches. This could be due to students prioritizing affective and metacognitive strategies, possibly because they find these approaches more effective in their learning. To compare and contrast these findings with previous research, it's crucial to consider the context, demographics, and methodologies used in previous studies. Future research should delve deeper into the reasons behind these strategy preferences and their impact on learning outcomes, as well as examining how cultural, socioeconomic, and educational factors may influence these choices. This can help educators and policymakers tailor teaching strategies to better support students in both urban and rural settings.

To conclude, the finding confirms that there are many similarities in learning strategies used by the students both in urban and rural school settings. It means that students' problems in learning English tend to be general or even universal for EFL learners. Thus, they will employ the same strategies in learning English, especially within online learning during Covid-19 pandemic (Ariawan, 2021). In addition to the cumulative comparison of mean percentage, it is clearly shown that students in urban and rural school setting more dominantly employ affective strategies in learning English with 69% and 62% respectively. It is argued that affective strategies might enable students to be active in finding new words or understanding someone's speaking by asking question or clarification. The present findings are in line with research in Thailand where affective strategies were revealed as the most favourable learning strategies (Sukyng, 2021), although it is different from a study conducted by Zou & Lertlit (2022) who discovered compensation strategies as the most dominant one. Furthermore, it is also in contrast with most studies that depicted metacognitive strategies as the most favourite strategies used by the students (Hapsari, 2019; Lestari & Fatimah, 2020; Salahshour et al., 2013). However, this percentage is not far different from those in the use of metacognitive strategies where students are required to plan and organise their learning, thus they will have a better understanding especially amidst Covid-19 pandemic where students are obliged to be active learners (Alfian, 2021; Deliany & Cahyono, 2020; Rianto, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, online learning has forced teachers to adjust their teaching strategies. It does not only affect teachers but also students who should adjust their learning styles. During online learning, students both in urban and rural schools employ those six types of strategies as proposed by Oxford (1990). However, the students have different strategies in practice. Most of them rated affective strategies as the most favourable as it enable students to clarify misunderstandings or mistakes that occurred during the interaction. However, this proportion is not that far different from the utilization of metacognitive strategies where most of the

research indicates this strategy as the most favourite and effective one for EFL students. In conclusion, it is suggested that this preliminary research needs to be followed by an in-depth interview to get wider insight from the students dealing with their experience and strategies.

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