



## **ESL Students' Study Strategies for Examinations**

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### **Authors' contribution**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Authors JA CL, JLM and AMR were the main proponents of the study. They designed the proposal. Author AESJ guided the main authors in the conduct of the methods, data analysis and formulation of conclusion. Author MGRC reviewed and managed the related literature relevant to the study served as the editor of the entire article. The study was collaboratively conducted by all authors. Moreover, all authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Aims:** To determine the different study strategies used by students in preparing for examinations, as well as to find out the various difficulties they encounter, and the significance of the utilization of such study strategies.

**Study Design:** This study used the qualitative method particularly the phenomenological-realistic approach.

**Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted at the Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST), Digos Campus during the first semester of school year 2019-2020.

**Methodology:** The participants were purposively chosen. Selection criteria were also considered such as: student was an English major, no failing marks in English subjects, and a full-time

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student. Researcher-made interview-guide questions based on the formulated research questions were used. The same was given to experts for evaluation and validation.

**Results:** Four themes with corresponding core idea were formulated from the data analysis. It revealed that despite the technology, note taking was the most common technique employed by students among other study strategies. Identified barriers while using note-taking were environmental distractions and physiological barriers. Interestingly, the participants had diverse techniques in addressing the barriers. The participants realized that having strategies were essential and potentially useful for them to become self-aware and confident. The strategies also lessened the pressure during the examination. Mentors need to encourage learners to adopt and develop their study strategies to gain success in their examinations.

**Conclusion:** The students' choice of study strategies is dependent on their needs and individual differences. Likewise, study strategies are dependent on convenience and effectivity. Among the different study strategies, note-taking stand-out and resulted as mostly preferred by students despite the advancement of technology. It implies that students choose to remain traditional. However, these study strategies are not fully convenient according to the students who have encountered certain difficulties that hinder them in using it smoothly. The students in turn have set coping measures to overcome the barriers they have encountered. Furthermore, the researchers have come to realize that the students utilize these study strategies not just mainly to prepare and pass examinations but also to attain academic excellence.

**Implication.** One of the great ancient philosophers once said that "no one is wiser than himself." Considering this thought, we can say that academic success does not depend on others but on someone who does the studies. It is therefore wise that for students to have better marks in examinations, they need to adopt or develop study strategies. On the part of the teachers, they can present to the learners the different examination strategies and make the students choose which strategies fit them best. Also, teachers can encourage the learners to sustain those strategies which are beneficial to them.

*Keywords: ESL; strategies; examinations; SPAMAST.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every student has their own different ways in dealing with problems especially in academics. Competent students are propelled to endeavor for academic excellence and regular ones tend to strive only for passing certain assessments. In this matter, the researchers have become interested in determining what study strategies students employ when studying to recuperate their academic performance and pass examinations which indicate their level of development and learning.

Previous researchers clearly demonstrated that one of the important predictors of student's academic performance is the study strategies or motives [1]. An empirical research supports the notion that diversity in academic performance among students is greatly due to their study strategies and different learning [2]. It was also demonstrated by Weinstein and Mayer [3] that the reason why there are varieties of strategies and students don't just stick to only one strategy it is mainly because of individual difference. It is stated, that the way student "A" study is far different from those of "C" and "D" students.

Research strategies, according to Hoover and Patton [4] include skills that tend to acquire, record, organize, synthesize, remember, and use information. Moreover, in both non-academic and academic contexts, these competencies lead to achievement. In addition, Gadzella and Williamson [5] and Weinstein and Mayer [3] stress out that study strategy is a concept that should composed of a variety of behaviors and activities, such as note-taking, organizing information, scheduling, concentrating ability, personal motivation and ways of mentally storing information. Moreover, several authors and researchers have enumerated various study strategies that are quite distinct from the commonly used strategies. These are restudying and/or massing study of McCabe [6], simple formative quizzes of Cox and Clark [7], cooperative learning of Reavenscroft et al., [8], student-generated questions for examinations, questioning of Anderson and Armbruster [9], guide notes of Konrad et al., [10], and the use of mnemonic strategies of Levin [11]. Significantly, the mentioned study strategies are helpful to the student's preparation. It enhances their learning, increased student performance, improves student retention of course content, enhances

student currency in reading involving and reduces test anxiety. These study strategies had produced positive effects to the student who chose to utilize it. However, there are some who failed to demonstrate a positive result.

Furthermore, even though there are several strategies to study for preparation in examinations, few of the students don't necessarily utilize one. Rereading and cramming for test are commonly endorsed by learners [12], even though they may not always yield durable learning. Although, this outcome is surprising, cramming the night before an exam might support relatively good exam performance, even though students use this might remember little of the content even a short time after the exam. From the study presented by Kornell and Bjork [13] wherein they conducted a survey to find out which of the study strategies are frequently used by students are considered to be effective. There are three study strategies which top the survey; first is underlining or highlighting while reading; second is testing you with questions or practice problems; and lastly, "cramming" lots of information the night before the test [13]. Success in academic achievement depends on more than exposure to facts and content knowledge. The results of which study strategy is effective may not be applicable to all. As what the researchers mentioned, that individual difference is one factor in regulating one's learning.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Primarily, the study aimed to determine the different study strategies used by students in preparing for examinations, as well as to find out the various difficulties they encounter, and the significance of the utilization of such study strategies. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: what strategies help the students most during exam?; what difficulties the students encounter with some study strategies?; what essential experience the participants can share to other students?

### 1.2 Theoretical Lens

The study was founded and anchored by the following theories: Theories of self-regulated learning, Walberg's theory of educational productivity, and Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. First, theories of self-regulated learning (SRL) claim that learners use a variety of strategies to achieve their learning goals, and that the quality of strategy use should be related to performance.

It is not clear, however, whether this aspect of the SRL theory explicitly refers to more formal environments or is more broadly applicable to environments in which learners are responsible for managing their learning. Indeed, a link between the use of tactics and the degree of achievement is not guaranteed for several reasons [14]. Second, Walberg's [15] theory of educational productivity, which is one of the few empirically, tested theories of school learning based on an extensive review and integration of over 3,000 studies emphasizes the home environment, school environment and others may have positive predictor on student's achievement [16]. From the report based on the large-scale implementation of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program, that students who became more self-aware and confident regarding their learning abilities, who were more motivated, who set learning goals, and who were organized in their approach to work (self-regulated learning) performed better in school. Third, Human Motivation Theory [17] as the crux of the theory is that before individuals are motivated to fulfill higher level requirements like physiological, security, love, belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization, the most basic needs of individuals must be met.

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

The outputs of the study were beneficial to improve and enhance students' learning through the study strategies enumerated above in accordance to which is suitable to their way of assessing knowledge and content. It may also give benefits to the parents, to make them aware of the students' activities in assessing their learning. This way they will be able to provide support and encouragement which are essential for their children's motivation. Likewise, this study is beneficial to the teachers in assessing the students' different learning strategies. It will allow them to make the learning experience more fun and practical. In addition, the teachers will be knowledgeable on how to prepare examinations. Also, the result of the study may serve as a reliable source of information for the administration. It will provide an empirical data from which may base the programs geared towards improving the students learning in taking the role of their education. Lastly, the result of the study will also beneficial to the researchers in a way that will provide supplementary data and information, specifically in relation to searching about the different study strategies utilized in preparing for exams.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS / EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS / METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Research Instrument**

The crafted interview-guide questions were based on the formulated research questions. The interview guide questions were composed of three main questions and probe questions which aimed at determining the kinds of the study strategies for examination utilized by the students from SPAMAST-Digos Campus and the impact of these strategies to their learning goals. These questions were subjected by experts' evaluation and validation.

### **2.2 Research Design**

This study used the qualitative-realistic phenomenology method developed by Reinach et al., in 1902 [18]. Phenomenology is a type of research design that studies the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. Specifically, the researchers used the method of realistic phenomenology to determine what significant experiences the participants encountered in their quest of utilizing diverse study strategies in preparing for examinations. It analyzed the 'intentional structures' of mental acts as they are directed at both real and ideal objects [19]. This method was appropriate to this study since it studies the structure of consciousness and intentionality [20]; it's being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. In addition, it stresses the search for the universal essences of various sorts of matters which includes human actions, motives and selves [21].

### **2.3 Data Collection**

The data collection procedures followed three stages. Preliminary stage. During this stage, the researchers obtained approval to conduct the study through a formal letter from the Digos City Division Superintendent. After the permission was obtained, formal letters of invitations were also sent to the different school reading coordinators for their participation. Attached to the letters w Researchers' strict observation of proper data collection procedures allows the attainment of reliability and transparency [22]. It also permits a systematic conduct of the study [23]. The source of information of this study was

mainly acquired through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) among the participants. Before the conduct of the formal interview, the researchers subjected the interview-guide questions to experts to check for its validity and reliability and to ensure that the questions were appropriate and were not offensive to the participants but rather evoke information that were in line with the interest of the study. San Jose's [24] crafted validation sheet was used.

The researchers first sought the consent of the participants and inform them about the purpose of the study. After the participants confirmed their participation, they were oriented about the interview protocols. The protocol stated the confidentiality, choice, and withdrawal clauses. During the discussion, the researchers facilitated the procedures and took detailed notes and recordings of the proceedings. After the interview, the information gathered were transcribed, coded, and interpreted based on the research problems.

### **2.4 Research Participants**

The research participants of this study were freshmen English students enrolled in SPAMAST – Digos Campus during the first semester of school year 2019 – 2020. There were four Focus Group Discussion (FGD) composed of four students each group. The participants were randomly picked. However, selection criteria were also considered such as: student was an English major, no failing marks in English subjects, and a full-time student.

### **2.5 Scopes and Delimitations**

The study was conducted with accompanying limitations that provided the focus of the study. Clearly, the study focused in determining the study strategies utilized, and experiences of the students in the preparation for examinations. This study used the qualitative method and interview was the main instrument in gathering the information. Only the first education students were considered and no other students from other course were included. With these delimitations, San Jose [24] pointed out that the findings cannot generalize the entire population; however, the results were only true to the participants involved. Thus, another study using quantitative method may be conducted to verify the results of this study.

## 2.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

In ensuring that the gathered information is reliable [25], Lincoln and Guba [26], Krefting [27], Croftly [28], Stahl and King [29] enumerated the four strategies to employ trustworthiness of a research; these are transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility. Transferability is attained when the outcomes of the study will be used by other researchers for further study. Also, it would serve as a basis for clarifications; and in the extent in which it can be transferred and applicable to other contexts [26]. On the other hand, dependability is the extent that the study could be repeated by other researchers and that the findings would be consistent [30]. If the researchers would replicate your study, there should be enough information from your research. Meanwhile, conformability is the degree of neutrality in the research study findings. The results are based on the participant's answers and not any potential bias or personal motivations of the researchers. Audit trail which emphasizes every step of data analysis that was made in order to provide a rationale for the decisions made and it demonstrate the conformability of the study [24]. This helps establish that the research study findings accurately portray participant's response [30]. Finally; Credibility is how confident the qualitative researchers are in the truth of the research study's findings. It is used to ensure the authenticity in the analyses of the information collected [26]. The researchers made it certain that the information were accessible upon the request of other researchers.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Shown below are the results of the Focus Group Discussion conducted among the 16 students of SPAMAST-Digos Campus. Mortos and San Jose [31], argued that to present qualitative information, there's a need in providing a table. However, in qualitative method, the investigator has the privilege to decide on the format in presenting the results [20]. Hence, the researchers utilized a table for better understanding and easy presentation. In classifying the attained information, the frequency is considered *General* if the responses of the participants have 50% of more recurrence; *Typical* if there is a 21-49% reaction specified in the interview; and *Variation* if the reaction's occurrence is 20% less.

### 3.1 Preferences of Study Strategy

Generally, the participants preferred to use note-taking as a study strategy for examinations. Note-taking is a complex activity that requires comprehension and selection of information and written production processes [32]. Most participants preferred to use note taking because they can easily recall, remember, and memorize relevant key points. Einstein et al., [33] mentioned that good organization of notes is helpful to memory and/or transfer of attention, and elaborate the processing of ideas. Comprehension is also easier because the important thoughts are already summarized and organized. Also, external storage and encoding information is the major benefit note-taking can give.

**Table 1. Themes and Core Ideas on ESL students' study strategies for examinations**

Themes	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Preferences of Study Strategy	General Variant	Note taking Highlighting the hand-outs Self-testing Cramming Mnemonics
Barriers in the Utilization of Study Strategies	General	Noise of the surrounding Numbness in the hands
Overcoming Barriers	Variation	Relocating a suitable place Resting for a while
Significance of Study Strategies	General	Effective for achieving academic excellence Giving the urge to succeed

Source: Data analysis of the data analyst

Moreover, according to Brown et al., [34], the use of effective strategies has emerged as a critical variable in recent models of human learning. Every student doesn't have the same study strategy; the reason why some students used distinct techniques that is convenient for them was due to their individual differences. Meanwhile, considering the variant answers of the students, for FGD 1, aside from note-taking, listening to music while studying, highlighting the hand-outs, and re-reading were also used but not frequently. Highlighting seems effective for a certain participant. Yue et al., [35], stated that indeed highlighting helps the learner remember the selected information better or make a later study session more efficient. Listening to music while studying stimulates and increases the learner's interest and motivation to learn, enjoy and engage in the learning process [36]. For FGD 2, some of them seldom used personal motivation, wherein the students more likely rely on self-motivation and support of family for preparing in examination which anchored on Maslow's Theory of needs which states that individual needs such as physiological, safety, support and the likes. Likewise, student-generated questions or what they simply referred to as pre-test/self-testing deemed effective for a certain participant, in which Theory of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) supports the notion that students are responsible for regulating their learning. Research has shown that it can boost student learning and test anxiety [37]. Frase and Schwartz [38] found that writing questions while reading significantly increased scores on posttest items, particularly those items that were highlighted in student-written questions. For FGD 3, they also utilized mnemonics or by the use of key words to study effectively and remember the points easily. DeLoache et al., [39]; Haden et al., [40] said that mnemonics improves memory performance and Cavanaugh et al, [41] added that it is effective in memory remediation in focusing on perception of memory ability. Also, one of the participants preferred to use oral reading/discussing when note-taking. According to *Kuya James*, discussing what you were studying provided better comprehension and effective retention. Lastly, FGD 4, aside from jotting down notes, it was said that *walk and talk alone strategy* helps; it did not just retain information efficiently but as well prevents the participant not to get sleepy. Additionally, a particular participant liked cramming. She stated, "*paspas mugana akong utok kung mag cramming*" (Translation: My brain functions well when I cram). Cramming as defined by Sommer

[42], as a period of neglect of study followed by a concentrated burst of studying immediately before an exam. Intuition would suggest that cramming may work to some degree for immediate results in a particular test but that the retention from such a study strategy would be short lived compared to a more methodical approach [43].

### 3.2 Barriers in the Utilization of Study Strategies

Mostly of the participants encountered the same dilemma upon the utilization of their preferred study strategy. The problems are categorized into Environmental distractions and Physiological barriers. Environmental distractions such as, noises from other people or from the surrounding distracts the participants to focus and study well. Poor quality environment and noisy conditions have detrimental effects which results discernable impacts on learners' comprehension, language learning, attention and other cognitive functions [44]. Likewise, Physiological barriers such as, sleepiness, numbness of the hand upon note-taking, state of health, and disability affects the student's concentration. Bajracharya [45] said that unconditioned body and mind, the information is not permanent and can be subjected to forgetting. Thus, it also fails to get the intended meaning of the message. However, some of the problems arising are the lack of learning materials and notes, which prohibits the students to be fully equipped in preparing for examination. As what they have stated that missing some relevant notes was quite a cause of distress for them especially when they rely on note-takings as their study material. Aside from the above mentioned barriers, in terms for note-takers, they usually had a hard time because of the amount of time note-taking consumes. It requires them to manage their time and set a schedule to organize the notes.

### 3.3 Overcoming Barriers

As stated, the participants have common barriers that restraints them in fully using their study strategy smoothly and conveniently. Nevertheless, they have diverse techniques in addressing these barriers. For FGD 1, they tried to just shake off the tempting feeling of engaging to other things, and maintain focus in terms of feeling sleepy. For FGD 2, drinking coffee to stay awake while studying because coffee contains caffeine, listen to music to freshen up the mind

and walking to feel lively. Meanwhile, for the FGD 3, relaxing for at least 10-30 minutes when boredom or exhaustion strikes, and finding a suitable place to study when the surrounding is noisy. Holland (1997) noted that environments foster the development of competencies, attitudes, interests, and values, the reason why students tend to look for comfortable environment wherein their brain functions very well. Then, for the FGD 4, they manage their time, especially in preparing the notes and asking for lessons if lacking some important topics. Kaushar [46] mentioned that students who practiced both planning and positive time attitudes found that they had more time to complete a task.

### 3.4 Significance of Study Strategies

A great deal of research provides evidence that study strategies and study attitudes are significant variables which determines the academic performance of students [47]. Similarly, the participants believed that the study strategies they have utilized are essential and also potentially useful that helps student be self-aware and confident regarding their learning approach based on Walberg's Theory. Specifically, these students being interviewed are all competitive and striving for academic excellence. They have asserted that it helps them to become what they are right now in the sense that they are able to accomplish certain goals. It also lessens their pressure and confidently concludes a better outcome from their examinations. According to Nicholls [48], the more individuals feel that they have learned, the more competent they feel. Furthermore, it does not just provide benefits to their academic status but as well to their abilities that was further enhanced and developed. The students are able to hone their skills not just in terms of reading and speaking well, but exercising the memory to retain information longer. It also builds character and confidence, and gives them the urge to succeed in any aspect of life.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The students' choice of study strategies is dependent on their needs and individual differences. Likewise, study strategies are dependent on convenience and effectivity. Among the different study strategies, note-taking stand-out and resulted as mostly preferred by students despite of the advancement of technology. It implies that students choose to

remain traditional despite the advancement in technology. However, these study strategies are not fully convenient according to the students who have encountered certain difficulties that hinder them in using it smoothly. The students in turn have set coping measures to overcome the barriers they have encountered. Furthermore, the researchers have come to realize that the students utilize these study strategies not just mainly to prepare and pass examinations but also to attain academic excellence.

### 4.1 Implication

One of the great ancient philosophers once said that "no one is wiser than himself." Considering this thought, we can say that academic success does not depend on others but on someone who does the studies. It is therefore wise that for students to have better marks in examinations, they need to adopt or develop study strategies. On the part of the teachers, they can present to the learners the different examination strategies and make the students choose which strategies fit them best. Also, teachers can encourage the learners to sustain those strategies which are beneficial to them.

## CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

In addressing the research ethics, the researchers observed the protocols in gathering the information from the participants. Consents were sought, the objectives of the study were given, withdrawal clause was included, and presentation of results was given. The participants were not put to harm in any way in the conduct of the study.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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