

Language Learning Strategies and English Proficiency of Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Language learning strategies are integral for learners to actively engage in their own process of second-language development. There is limited empirical data available in some Philippine public schools on the relationship between students' strategic learning behaviors and their self-reported English proficiency. This study examines the relationship between language learning strategies and the self-reported English proficiency of Grade 10 learners in Polomolok 5 District, South Cotabato Division, Philippines. This study adopted a quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive-correlational approach and collected data from 200 randomly sampled Grade 10 learners. Data were collected using adapted versions of instruments that measured the six dimensions of language learning strategies (i.e., memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies) and the five dimensions of self-reported English proficiency (i.e., spoken tasks, comprehension, interaction strategies, quality of spoken performance, and writing tasks). Descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple linear regression were employed to analyze the data. Results of this study showed that participants engaged extensively in the use of language learning strategies ($M = 3.45$). The use of metacognitive strategies was the most reported ($M = 3.59$) and self-reported English proficiency also reported to be extensive ($M = 3.43$) with writing tasks being the most reported ($M = 3.80$). Language learning strategies positively and significantly related to self-reported English proficiency ($r = .523$, $p < .001$). A positive and significant relationship was reported at the domain level between cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies and self-reported English proficiency. As a result, the overall model was statistically significant with an adjusted R^2 of .288. Metacognitive and social strategies were the significant predictors in this model. There is a positive relationship between the planning, monitoring, regulating, and socializing of language learning and self-reported English proficiency. The authors recommend the use of explicit teaching of strategies that include both meta-cognition and social learning activities, understanding that a large part of the variance in self-reported English proficiency is still to be explained by the variables studied.

Keywords: language learning strategies; self-reported English proficiency; metacognition; social strategies; Grade 10 students; Philippine public schools

INTRODUCTION

In places where English is one of the main teachings, speaking, and writing language and the primary gateway to other educational and employment pathways, the teaching and learning of English is an important consideration. Proficiency in English for secondary school learners exceeds simply having an understanding of English grammar and the vocabulary. It is the ability to read and listen to English and understand the spoken and the written language, as well as the ability to speak and write in English to communicate and effectively express thoughts.

Several factors influence the development of self-reported English proficiency at different levels and in different contexts. One of the factors at the level of the learner that is greatly noted is the use of learning strategies. As defined by Oxford, learning strategies are the methods and techniques that learners decide to use to ensure the acquisition and the proper application of a target language. Learning strategies do not

substitute the act of memorization but extend beyond it to include the ways learners stack their studies, manage their focus, address the barriers to communication, and control their emotions and interaction with others.

For this study, language learning strategies are defined in terms of cognitive, memory, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The language learning environment requires the cognitive and behavioral dimensions and emotional and interpersonal dimensions. The measure employed in this study uses Kean's framework, which identifies the same six terms.

Memory strategies and cognitive strategies help a learner organize and process information. Strategies of compensation focus on working around challenges with the language of communication. Metacognitive strategies are planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning. Affective strategies include management of emotions and attitudes during learning. Social strategies focus mainly on collaboration with language users.

Of these, metacognitive strategies are the most important since they help learners to regulate their own strategies. If a learner plans their learning, monitors and assesses their own progress, they can develop the learning behavior and strategies a task requires. Likewise, social strategies provide numerous opportunities for the use of language in authentic contexts.

The study says that learning strategy research supports the importance of strategy use. Chand and Ella found a positive relationship between strategy use and proficiency level. Villamizar noted that the frequency of strategy use demonstrated a high level of English proficiency. It is worth emphasizing that the findings from different studies show a high level of inconsistency.

Inconsistency of findings motivates the need for further studies in other educational settings. Findings from foreign studies cannot automatically be applied to learners in the Philippines. Differences in instruction, classroom management, language exposure, social context, availability of resources, and ways in which language is used in class affect the learners in different settings.

This study is concerned with Grade 10 learners from Polomolok 5 District, Schools Division of South Cotabato. Local empirical data are needed to describe learners' use of language learning strategies and how these strategies affect their level of proficiency in English.

Research Objectives

This study aimed to:

1. To assess the use of language learning strategies by students, focusing on the following:

- memory strategies
- cognitive strategies
- compensatory strategies
- metacognitive strategies
- affective strategies
- social strategies

2. To assess students' English proficiency in terms of

- spoken tasks,
- understanding and comprehension,
- strategies for participation,
- spoken performance, and
- writing tasks;

3. To examine whether language learning strategies correlate with English proficiency; and
4. To assess which language learning strategy correlates with English proficiency.

Given these purposes, the null hypotheses were set as there was no significant correlation between language learning strategies and English proficiency, as well as no correlation between the domains within language learning strategies and self-reported English proficiency.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language Learning Strategies

Language acquisition can be defined by many strategies learners use intentionally. The study considers six dimensions: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Memory strategies are about either retention or retrieval. Some memory strategies include making connections to old information, associating old information to new information, or making use of various verbal-based recall strategies (mnemonic devices). The study claimed memory strategies were used the least, while metacognitive and social strategies were used the most. This may suggest that learners prefer to use regulating and interpersonal approaches and that memorizing is less preferred.

Cognitive strategies are mental operations learners perform to understand the language. These include verbal recycling, practice, and organization; verbal summarization; guessing based on context; and imagining. All of these strategies involve manipulating language.

Compensation strategies help bridge gaps when learners do not know grammar or vocabulary. This strategy does not stop learners from communicating. When a required word or sentence is not known, learners can communicate using other strategies, such as substitute words, paraphrasing, using other communication modalities, and others.

Metacognitive strategies include planning and review; evaluating one's understanding of a learning goal; and monitoring and regulating comprehension. The study found this dimension to be the most important and this metacognitive strategy was the most important predictor of self-reported English proficiency.

Affective strategies describe the emotional aspects of learners when using a foreign language. Encouraging oneself to communicate even with the fear of making mistakes, anxiety control, and confidence creation, are affective strategies. The study showed that affective strategies were among the least reported areas, which may necessitate further instruction.

Social strategies stem from learning by interacting. English learners may engage their classmates in conversation, ask their classmates to explain, request them to repeat themselves, or talk to others that they perceive to be more fluent. The research reported that the social strategy was one of the most dominant areas and a strong predictor of self-reported English proficiency.

Self-Reported English Proficiency

Self-Reported English proficiency, in this case, refers to the reported ability of the learners when expressing themselves in English either orally or in writing. It was defined in terms of five elements: tasks which involve the communication of messages, comprehension, the use of communication strategies, the quality of the spoken performance, and writing tasks.

In these tasks, the candidate is supposed to communicate meaningful messages. Comprehension, on the other hand, refers to the understanding of the content communicated in English. Interaction strategies concern the learners' confidence and their ability to manage the problems caused by communication. The quality of spoken performance concerns the verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication. The writing tasks refer to the ability to express messages in writing. The concept is best described in multiple dimensions. It is insufficient to reduce the description of the proficiency to a single language skill. Effective communication is achieved when the receptive and productive skills are integrated.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model defines language learning strategies as predictors and self-reported English proficiency as the criterion variable. Predictor domains consist of six dimensions of strategies; outcome constructs consist of five dimensions of proficiency.

The study reported a significant overall relationship of these constructs, and, hence, examined the unique contribution of each domain of strategy through multiple regression.

The relationship should be seen as predictive and associative, rather than causal. The non-experimental nature of the study means that the findings do not show that the use of a certain strategy will lead to an improvement in self-reported English proficiency.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive-correlational design. This design describes language learning strategies, self-reported English proficiency metrics, and the relationship between these two constructs. This was all done without interfering with the learning environment.

Pearson product-moment correlation was used to analyze the correlation between language learning strategies and self-reported English proficiency. After that, multiple linear regression was used to identify which of the language learning strategy domains correlates with self-reported English proficiency.

The findings of the regression should be interpreted using predictive language. Just because a factor predicts a language learning strategy does not mean that factor is causally related to language learning strategies. The design is merely capable of highlighting the presence of statistically significant correlations and predictors of the model, but cannot identify discrete cause-and-effect relationships.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were 200 Grade 10 students from schools in the Polomolok 5 District of the South Cotabato Division for the School Year 2022–2023. Stratified random sampling was utilized; the original study chose participants from the selected school population.

Participation was limited to Grade 10 students in the selected district schools. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants in accordance with the ethical standards and procedures of the study.

Research Instruments

The language learning strategy questionnaire is based on Kean (2018) and evaluates memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The original questionnaire reportedly had a Cronbach's alpha of .90, indicating a high degree of internal consistency. In addition, it was reviewed by experts and contextually adapted.

English proficiency was measured using an instrument attributed to North and Schneider (1998) and covers the tasks of speech, comprehension and interaction strategies, the quality of spoken performance, and writing tasks. The instrument reported a reliability coefficient of .92.

To ensure consistency, both instruments were adapted to use a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

Data Collection

The research was conducted in August-November 2022. The researcher and collaborating schools obtained permission for the research. During the data collection, catch-them-up surveys were shared through Google Forms, emails, and surveys posted on social media. These were used for face-to-face surveys where internet access was insufficient for students.

Volunteer participation was the case. The participants of the research were made aware of the aims of the research, the steps to be taken, the confidentiality of the process, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage.

Ethical Considerations

The study complied with institutional requirements relating to ethics, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and data protection. Study participants were informed of the study's purposes and the voluntary nature of the study. The researcher has also limited access to the data collected and implemented measures to desensitize respondents' identities.

Data Analysis

Means and descriptive interpretations were used to analyze the language learning strategy and self-reported English proficiency measures.

Pearson product-moment correlation was done to see how the language learning strategies relate to self-reported English proficiency. Multiple linear regression was used to see how the six strategy domains relate to self-reported English proficiency. Significance was set at .05.

RESULTS

Language Learning Strategies

The overall mean for language learning strategies was 3.45, and was interpreted as extensive. The following are the mean scores for the six domains:

Language Learning Strategy	Mean	Interpretation
Memory	3.36	Moderately extensive
Cognitive	3.46	Extensive
Compensation	3.41	Extensive
Metacognitive	3.59	Extensive
Affective	3.32	Moderately extensive
Social	3.55	Extensive
Overall	3.45	Extensive

Metacognitive strategies averaged the highest score ($M = 3.59$). Participants indicated they engaged in the strategies that facilitate learning and improvement ($M = 3.87$), but displayed less preference for strategies related to planning of study schedules ($M = 3.22$). This may reflect participants' greater preference for self-improvement through general self-improvement strategies (study schedule planning).

Social strategies average score was the next highest ($M = 3.55$). Participants engaged in a variety of strategies including practice of English speaking with other learners and communication partners.

Cognitive strategies had a mean of 3.46. Participants engaged in practicing English sounds. In contrast, participants reported word-for-word translation was particularly un-strategic.

Compensation strategies had a mean of 3.41. Participants reported they guessed words they didn't know in English and read without looking up each word. Memory strategies had a mean of 3.36. Participants connected old learning to new learnings of English.

Affective strategies average was the lowest ($M = 3.32$). Participants encouraged themselves to practice English for themselves.

The participants were generally positive about using SLS strategies.

Self-Reported English Proficiency

Based on the extensive mean of 3.43, the English proficiency is overall adequate.:

Self-Reported English Proficiency Domain	Mean	Interpretation
Spoken Tasks	3.28	Moderately extensive
Comprehension	3.43	Extensive
Interaction strategies	3.36	Moderately extensive
Quality of spoken performance	3.26	Moderately extensive
Writing Task	3.80	Moderately extensive
Overall	3.43	Extensive

Writing tasks recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.80$), demonstrating that in their own perception, having the strongest dimension of English language skills was the ability to write. Mean for comprehension was 3.43.

The mean of spoken tasks was 3.28 and for interaction strategies it was 3.36. The lowest reported mean was for the quality of spoken performance (3.26).

This may indicate a stronger ability in writing and comprehension, and comparative weaker ability in dimensions of spoken and interaction skills. However, as the proficiency instrument is self-report, the findings should be considered the participants' perceived or reported proficiency rather than demonstrated proficiency.

Relationship Between Language Learning Strategies and Self-Reported English Proficiency

Pearson's correlation confirmed a positive relationship between overall language learning and English proficiency, with the correlation value r being .523 and p less than .001.

The correlation value shows a moderate positive relationship between the two. Therefore, the use of language learning strategies was positively related to self-reported English proficiency, with the participants who reported successful use of language learning strategies also showing self-reported English proficiency.

For each of the domains—that is, cognitive, metacognitive, and social—language learning strategies correlated with self-reported English proficiency, with the reported correlation values being .446, .555, and .616, respectively.

These results confirm that the engagement of language learning strategies is a contributing factor to language proficiency for the study population. It also confirms that the strength of association of each of the strategy domains is not of the same magnitude.

Predictors of self-reported English Proficiency

Multiple linear regression was performed on the six language-learning-strategy domains to predict English proficiency. The overall regression model was statistically significant with $F = 91.104$, $p < .05$. The adjustment R^2 was .288, thus the predictors accounted for approximately 28.8% of the variance in self-reported English proficiency.

In the model, metacognitive and social strategies were significant predictors. As reported in the manuscript, the corresponding coefficients are 0.204 for metacognitive and 0.392 for social strategies.

Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Self-Reported English Proficiency from Language Learning Strategy Domains

Predictor domain	B	SE	β	t*	p
Memory strategies	-0.102	0.061	0.028	-1.672	.113
Cognitive strategies	-0.118	0.074	0.095	-1.595	.088
Compensation strategies	0.092	0.072	0.035	1.278	.106
Metacognitive strategies	0.204	0.078	0.246	2.615	.000
Affective strategies	-0.102	0.061	0.028	-1.672	.113
Social strategies	0.392	0.084	0.342	4.667	.000

Finally, the regression model indicates that metacognitive and social strategies made statistically significant unique contributions to the prediction of self-reported English Proficiency when the six strategy domains were entered simultaneously. The adjusted R^2 of .288 indicates that approximately 28.8% of the variance in Self-Reported English Proficiency was accounted for by the predictors included in the model, while approximately 71.2% remained unexplained by this set of variables. Because the study was non-experimental, these coefficients should be interpreted as statistical associations and predictions within the model rather than causal effects.

DISCUSSION

The study found that an overwhelming majority of Grade 10 students reported frequent use of language learning strategies. An overall mean of 3.45 indicates that students demonstrated a considerable degree of strategic learning behaviors. The strongest strategies were the metacognitive and social strategies, while the affective and memory strategies were the weakest.

The presence of metacognitive strategy is of great importance. Metacognition involves the learner taking control of their own learning. Unlike the teacher-centered approach, the learner using metacognitive strategy directs themselves to acquire the best way they learn, evaluate their knowledge in the learning process, and identify means to enhance their performance. The original study links the metacognitive strategy to self-monitoring and self-regulation.

It is also of great importance to note the fairly high social-strategy score. Language is by its nature communicative, and opportunities to work with other learners may allow students to practice vocabulary,

clarify and negotiate meaning, and build confidence. The participants reported that they often practiced English with their peers and repeatedly requested that they clarify or repeat what they said when they understood very little.

The mean for the affective strategy implies a probable instructional opportunity. Learning a language involves emotions, among others, anxiety, embarrassment, fear of posing mistakes, and confidence. Although students reported that they encouraged themselves to speak English despite fear of mistakes, the overall use of the affective strategy was considerably less than the metacognitive and social strategies. This implies that the strategies designed to enhance confidence and emotional control in the classroom are required along with the existing strategies.

Results for English proficiency show another interesting pattern. For this part of the study, participants scored best for writing, and worst for speaking. Part of the reason for this may be that participants view their written English skills as more confident and developed, as they have additional time to consider their responses and organize their thoughts for the writing activity, as opposed to the spontaneous nature of speaking.

The other finding shown is a positive correlation between self-reported English proficiency and the use of language learning strategies, which supports the other authors' findings explained in the original manuscript. Villamizar focused on the relationship between strategy use and proficiency, and Chand mentioned the relationship between strategy use and proficiency in a positive context.

With this finding, caution is warranted, as other studies have reported contrasting results. For instance, Ella (2018) found no significant correlation between language learning strategies and self-reported English proficiency among Grade 12 students. These discrepancies may be attributed to differences in the participants, research instruments, proficiency levels measured, instructional activities, and cultural contexts.

As for this part of the study, the regression findings provide some additional insight. Multiple strategy domains were correlated with self-reported English proficiency; however, only metacognitive and social strategies were significant predictors when all six strategy domains were considered. This shows that the inclusion of other strategy domains in the model may influence the predictive value of individual strategies.

Because they involve the coordination of multiple learning behaviors, metacognitive strategies may be the most significant. A learner who plans, monitors, and evaluates learning is in a better position to determine if and when to use a memory, cognitive, compensation, or affective strategy. Within this context, the role of metacognition can be to organize students' language-learning behavior.

Social strategies may be significant too. Language-learning strategies that enhance proficiency are utilized in real world communication. Negotiation of meaning, clarification seeking, and building confidence would occur repeatedly while interacting with peers. The adjusted R^2 of .288 is significant too. It suggests that the six language-learning strategy domains accounted for the variance in self-reported English proficiency to the extent of approximately 28.8%. The other 71.2% of the variance suggests that English proficiency may be attributable to other variables.

Therefore, the findings should not suggest that language learning strategies are the sole or the most crucial variables that account for self-reported English proficiency. In fact, they show that strategic learning behavior is one key variable out of many that affect English proficiency.

For future studies, English language exposure outside school, reading habits, socio-economic status, availability of learning resources, classroom interaction, motivation, level of anxiety regarding the use of language, support of the parents, and use of digital media and the opportunities for real-world communication may be considered.

Educational Implications

The findings have several implications for English teaching in public schools in the Philippines.

First, teachers should teach language-learning strategies. Teachers can model some of the planning and evaluating of the task and monitoring comprehension, as well as solving a problem that may be a barrier to communication.

Second, metacognitive strategies usually have to be present in lessons. Some examples that can be used in lessons to teach metacognitive strategies include students planning to learn something, monitoring how they participate in the lesson, and reflecting on what they learned. This can be done in lessons by adding a routine of making a plan, monitoring, and evaluating to the activities that include reading, writing, speaking, or vocabulary.

Third, in order to help students, develop social language skills, teachers need to create opportunities to do this. A lot of activities can be used to help students improve their social skills by communicating in English such as pair work, group work, peer activities, role play, talking in a circle to lessen the number of people everyone needs to communicate with, and activities that fill the information gap.

Fourth, spoken activities and the quality of spoken performance were typically lower in the assessment of the participants. To improve this, teachers need to provide speaking opportunities to students that are lower in risk. After this, they can progress to formal spoken presentations.

Fifth, affective strategies need to be addressed. Teachers can create classroom norms where students have control of their environment by saying positive things to themselves. Teachers can help students reduce the barrier of communicating in English by helping them to feel less anxious.

Finally, school-level professional development can emphasize the ability of teachers to express learning strategies. The suggestions also called for teacher development in strategies related to language learning to help teachers integrate such strategies into their lessons.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations are worth noting when interpreting the findings.

First, the study used a cross-sectional, non-experimental design. Thus, we can only speak of associations. For the finding that the application of metacognitive strategies and social strategies was related to the level of self-reported English proficiency, this finding should be regarded as a prediction in the regression model and not as causing an increase in self-reported English proficiency.

Second, the sample was made up of 200 Grade 10 students from one District in South Cotabato. For this reason, the findings cannot be generalized to all Filipino Junior High School students.

Third, the study was based on self-report measures. Social desirability, memory, and cognition of students, and their understanding and interpretation of the statements, influence self-report data.

Fourth, self-reported English proficiency was measured through reported indicators as opposed to objective measures of self-reported English proficiency, such as a standardized English language assessment, a speaking test, a writing test, classroom observations, and/or teacher ratings. Further studies are encouraged to incorporate self-reported strategy measures with objective measures of English language proficiency, such as standardized English language testing, speaking and writing assessments, classroom observations, and/or teacher ratings.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed language learning strategies and self-reported English proficiency levels of Grade 10 students in Polomolok 5 District, Schools Division of South Cotabato. Students used various language learning strategies, and the use of metacognitive and social strategies was the highest. There was overall extensive level English proficiency, and students noted that writing tasks were the strongest of the dimensions.

Language learning strategies and self-reported English proficiency were found to have a statistically significant positive relationship ($r = .523$, $p < .001$). Of the cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies, all were found to be related to self-reported English proficiency. Multiple regression confirmed that the six strategy domains were a significant model, and they explained 28.8% of self-reported English proficiency. Of the six domains, both metacognitive and social strategies were found to be significant.

Strategic engagement in language learning was found to be related to self-reported English proficiency. In particular, the use of learning self-regulation and social strategies were noted.

The study noted that language learning strategies were only one component of self-reported English proficiency, leaving 71.2% of self-reported English proficiency to be explained by other constructs and contexts. Future studies are needed to examine other variables and contexts.

For Philippine public-school English instruction, the findings further support the need for a shift from English content instruction to teaching and training learners to learn, regulate, and engage in language communication processes in English.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings and limitations described.

- English teachers should implement goal setting, self-monitoring and self-assessment through the teaching of metacognitive strategies.
- Teaching meaningful peer interaction can be enhanced by the inclusion of collaborative speaking tasks, pair and group work, role play and peer feedback.
- Professional development directed at embedding language learning strategies should be made available to teaching staff within the school context.
- There is a particular need to strengthen spoken English, including the management of fear of making mistakes and enhancement of the willingness to communicate.
- Further studies should incorporate objective measures of proficiency. Self-report surveys should also be used in combination with these.
- Further studies should aim to identify other contextual variables that may enhance the English language proficiency of students.
- Different school contexts should be used for replication studies. The existing relationships should be examined in these other contexts.
- Longitudinal research, or research over a period of time, should be used to provide evidence on whether English language learners benefit from teaching methods that incorporate social and metacognitive strategies.

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