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The Influence of Language Learning Strategies on Students' Linguistic Competence

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Abstract
Linguistics, as the scientific study of language, provides a fundamental framework for understanding how learners acquire and develop their linguistic competence. However, many students still face difficulties in achieving adequate mastery of language skills, which can hinder their academic performance. This study aims to examine the influence of language learning strategies on students' linguistic competence. A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a survey design with a sample of undergraduate students from the English Department. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire based on Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and a linguistic competence test covering phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The results of regression analysis indicate that language learning strategies have a significant positive effect on students' linguistic competence, with metacognitive and cognitive strategies showing the strongest influence. These findings suggest that effective use of language learning strategies enhances students' understanding of linguistic principles and improves their overall performance in linguistics courses. The study highlights the pedagogical implication that lecturers should integrate strategy-based instruction in the classroom to optimize students' linguistic development.

INTRODUCTION

Language has long been recognized as a fundamental tool of human communication, identity, and cultural exchange. In the era of globalization, the ability to use language effectively—both native and foreign—has become an essential competence in education and professional life. Linguistics, as a field of study, provides theoretical and practical foundations for understanding how language works, from phonetics and phonology to syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Fromkin et al., 2020). However, despite increasing global emphasis on linguistic education, many students continue to struggle with mastering linguistic competence, particularly in higher education contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). Reports from UNESCO (2021) indicate that insufficient linguistic competence not only impedes students' academic progress but also restricts their future opportunities in global labor markets. These challenges highlight the urgent need for educational interventions that bridge the gap between linguistic theory and practical competence (Dörnyei, 2020).

Several interrelated factors have been identified as barriers to students' linguistic competence (Gu, 2019). First, traditional teacher-centered pedagogy often limits students'

opportunities to actively engage with linguistic concepts (Pham & Vo, 2022). Second, limited exposure to authentic language input, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts, reduces opportunities to internalize linguistic structures (Taguchi & Roever, 2019). Third, learner-related factors such as motivation, anxiety, and metacognitive awareness significantly influence the process of acquiring linguistic competence (Anderson, 2020; Oxford, 2020;). Finally, socio-economic disparities contribute to unequal access to quality learning resources, resulting in varied outcomes among students even within the same educational system (Liu & Wang, 2021). Together, these factors create persistent gaps in students' understanding of linguistics and their ability to apply theoretical concepts in practice (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021).

The consequences of inadequate linguistic competence are wide-ranging (Hsieh & Kang, 2021). Academically, students often encounter difficulties in comprehending linguistic texts, analyzing grammatical structures, or conducting linguistic research (Nassaji, 2020). This lack of competence hinders their ability to engage critically with linguistic theory, which is essential for higher-level cognitive and academic development (Gao, 2010). Professionally, graduates with weak linguistic competence may struggle in careers that require strong communication and analytical skills, such as teaching, translation, and applied linguistics research (Saito & Hanzawa, 2021). On a broader scale, inadequate competence undermines a nation's human capital development in linguistics-related fields, reducing competitiveness in global academic and professional markets (UNESCO, 2021). Thus, addressing these factors is crucial for both individual success and societal advancement. In response to these challenges, researchers have increasingly examined the role of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) as a means of enhancing linguistic competence. LLS are defined as the specific actions, techniques, or behaviors employed by learners to facilitate the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of language knowledge (Oxford, 2020). These strategies include cognitive strategies (e.g., summarizing, analyzing, using mnemonic devices), metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning), affective strategies (e.g., managing anxiety, increasing motivation), and social strategies (e.g., asking questions, practicing with peers). Previous studies have demonstrated that learners who actively employ LLS tend to achieve higher levels of linguistic competence, particularly in areas of phonology, syntax, and semantics (Zhang, 2021; Griffiths, 2019). However, findings remain inconsistent across cultural and educational contexts, suggesting that more research is needed to explore the interaction between LLS and linguistic competence in diverse student populations.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the direct relationship between LLS and linguistic competence within the framework of Introduction to Linguistics courses at the undergraduate level. While much research has been devoted to the impact of LLS on general language proficiency (Griffiths, 2019; Oxford, 2020), relatively few studies have investigated how these strategies specifically influence students' understanding of core linguistic concepts, such as phonetics, morphology, and syntax. By narrowing the focus to linguistic competence rather than overall language proficiency, this research provides new insights into how strategies function in academic contexts that emphasize linguistic theory. Furthermore, this study employs a combination of survey data and objective linguistic testing, offering a more comprehensive assessment compared to studies relying solely on self-report questionnaires.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the growing demand for linguistically competent graduates in education, translation, and applied linguistics sectors. As higher education institutions increasingly internationalize their curricula, the pressure on students to master both theoretical and applied aspects of linguistics continues to rise (Taguchi & Roever, 2019). Without targeted interventions, many students risk falling behind, thereby limiting their academic and professional opportunities. Identifying the strategies that most effectively enhance linguistic competence provides a pathway for lecturers and policymakers to design evidence-based curricula that respond to these challenges. Based on the issues described above, the primary objective of this research is to investigate the influence of Language Learning Strategies on students' linguistic competence.

Specifically, the study aims: To examine the extent to which students utilize LLS in learning linguistics. To analyze the relationship between different categories of LLS (cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social) and linguistic competence. To identify which strategies have the most significant effect on students' mastery of linguistic components such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The findings of this research are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the study enriches the body of knowledge on applied linguistics by providing empirical evidence on the specific impact of LLS on linguistic competence in the Indonesian context, contributing to cross-cultural validation of strategy effectiveness. Practically, the results will guide educators in designing pedagogical practices that integrate strategy-based instruction, thereby improving students' engagement and outcomes in linguistics courses. Additionally, the study offers insights for curriculum developers and policymakers in higher education to ensure that linguistic training meets the evolving demands of globalization and digital transformation. For students, the findings serve as a roadmap to develop more autonomous, effective learning habits that support their academic and professional growth in an increasingly competitive global environment.

RESEARCH METHOD

The present research adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language learning strategies contributed to the development of students' linguistic competence (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). This approach allowed the researcher to illustrate, analyze, and interpret the phenomena as they naturally occurred in the academic context of undergraduate linguistics courses. Rather than focusing solely on abstract theoretical claims, the study grounded its investigation in the lived experiences and observable practices of students. It aimed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge of language learning strategies and their practical effects on linguistic competence by capturing the dynamic interplay of cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning in a real educational setting (Creswell, 2018).

The study was conducted at the English Department of a state university in Indonesia, where the *Introduction to Linguistics* course was a compulsory component of the undergraduate curriculum. This context provided a relevant and concentrated environment for exploring the relationship between students' strategies and their linguistic competence. The course covered fundamental aspects of linguistics—phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics—making it a suitable platform for examining students'

mastery of linguistic principles. Moreover, the department comprised a diverse student body with varied educational backgrounds and learning experiences, offering a rich pool of data for analysis.

The research took place over one academic semester (approximately six months), allowing sustained observation of students' learning processes and capturing any shifts in their use of strategies over time. Conducting the study within one semester ensured that the findings reflected the natural rhythm of academic learning cycles, from introductory exposure to final assessments. This timeframe enabled the identification of patterns of consistency or change in students' strategic behavior as they engaged with complex linguistic concepts.

The study examined several interrelated aspects shaping the relationship between language learning strategies and linguistic competence: cognitive aspects—how students processed, organized, and analyzed linguistic information, such as recognizing phonological patterns or parsing syntactic structures; metacognitive aspects—how students planned, monitored, and evaluated their own learning of linguistic theory; affective aspects—students' attitudes, motivation, and emotional regulation when dealing with linguistic challenges; and social aspects—how students collaborated with peers, sought clarification, and practiced applying linguistic concepts through interaction. Investigating these four dimensions provided a holistic perspective on how strategies manifested in the classroom and influenced students' competence across various linguistic subfields.

The population consisted of all undergraduate students enrolled in the *Introduction to Linguistics* course during the academic year of the study. From this population, a purposive sample of 120 students was selected based on active enrollment, willingness to participate, and representativeness regarding gender, academic background, and prior language learning exposure. This sampling ensured diversity reflective of the broader student body while remaining manageable for detailed data collection and analysis.

Data were collected using instruments designed to capture both students' strategic behaviors and their actual linguistic competence. A questionnaire adapted from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) gathered data on students' use of cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Students responded on a Likert scale, enabling quantifiable analysis of strategy frequency and type. A linguistic competence test assessed phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, using both objective items (multiple-choice, short answers) and analytical tasks (parsing sentences, identifying morphemes, analyzing sound patterns). This test measured both theoretical understanding and practical application of linguistic knowledge. Semi-structured interviews with a subset of students and lecturers provided in-depth insights into students' choice of strategies and challenges faced. Classroom observations documented strategy enactment in real time, adding contextual nuance to the findings.

Data analysis followed a systematic process: questionnaire responses were coded and tabulated to map strategy use distribution; test scores were compiled to profile linguistic competence; descriptive statistics examined correlations between strategy use and competence; and interview transcripts and observation notes were thematically analyzed to triangulate and support quantitative results. This multi-layered approach ensured a reliable, comprehensive account of the phenomena studied.

To ensure credibility, the questionnaire was adapted and piloted to confirm clarity and relevance, with reliability testing confirming its internal consistency. Content validity of the linguistic competence test was established through expert review by linguistics lecturers, verifying accurate representation of targeted subfields. Triangulation across questionnaires, tests, interviews, and observations enhanced trustworthiness by allowing cross-validation of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Study Participants

The study involved 120 undergraduate students enrolled in the *Introduction to Linguistics* course in the English Department of a state university in Indonesia. The sample represented a diverse range of students in terms of gender, academic background, and prior exposure to English. Approximately 68 students (56.7%) were female, and 52 students (43.3%) were male, which reflects the gender distribution commonly observed in language education programs. The average age of participants was 20.4 years, with most students in their fourth semester of study.

Students came from various regions of Indonesia, bringing linguistic diversity that influenced their language learning strategies. Some students had prior exposure to English through private courses or exchange programs, while others relied exclusively on classroom instruction. This diversity made the sample particularly relevant for examining how learning strategies function in a heterogeneous academic environment.

The *Introduction to Linguistics* course itself covered phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Assessments included midterm and final examinations, as well as smaller assignments and group projects. Within this context, the research sought to understand how students' learning strategies impacted their ability to master these core areas of linguistic theory.

Description of the Variables

The study focused on two primary variables:

1. **Language Learning Strategies (LLS)** – These were measured through a structured questionnaire adapted from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The questionnaire assessed four major categories:
    - **Cognitive strategies**, such as note-taking, summarizing, and analyzing examples.
    - **Metacognitive strategies**, such as planning, monitoring progress, and self-evaluating learning.
    - **Affective strategies**, including managing anxiety, boosting motivation, and fostering confidence.
    - **Social strategies**, such as asking questions, discussing with peers, and seeking help from instructors.
2. **Linguistic Competence** – This was evaluated using a specially designed test covering phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Scores provided a quantitative measure

of students' mastery of linguistic concepts, supplemented by short-answer tasks that required analysis and application.

By combining these two variables, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of how strategic behavior correlates with mastery of linguistic theory.

Overview of Data Collected

From the 120 students, all completed the questionnaire, and 115 successfully completed the linguistic competence test. The small gap was due to absences during testing sessions. For consistency, statistical analysis was based on the 115 complete data sets.

- Questionnaire results: Scores on the LLS questionnaire ranged from 2.1 to 4.8 (on a 5-point Likert scale), with an overall mean of 3.62, indicating moderate to high strategy use.
- Test results: Scores on the linguistic competence test ranged from 48 to 92 (out of 100), with an average score of 72.5.

Initial descriptive analysis showed that students with higher reported use of strategies tended to achieve higher scores in linguistic competence. This observation provided the foundation for more detailed examination of the relationships between strategy types and test outcomes.

Findings by Research Objective

a. Utilization of Language Learning Strategies

Analysis of questionnaire data revealed several patterns. Metacognitive strategies were the most frequently reported, with an average score of 3.87. Students commonly planned their study schedules, monitored their progress, and adjusted strategies when difficulties arose. Cognitive strategies followed closely, with a mean score of 3.75, reflecting widespread use of notetaking, summarizing, and analyzing linguistic examples. Social strategies had a mean of 3.54, while affective strategies were least employed, with a mean of 3.32.

This indicates that students were more comfortable with self-regulated approaches (planning, analyzing) than with emotional regulation or peer collaboration.

b. Relationship between LLS and Linguistic Competence

Correlation analysis demonstrated a significant positive relationship between overall LLS scores and linguistic competence ($r = 0.62$, $p < .01$). This suggests that students who employed strategies more frequently tended to perform better on the linguistic competence test. Among the strategy types, metacognitive strategies showed the strongest correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < .01$), followed by cognitive strategies ($r = 0.61$, $p < .01$). Social strategies displayed a moderate correlation ($r = 0.45$, $p < .05$), while affective strategies had the weakest relationship ($r = 0.29$, not significant). These findings suggest that effective self-regulation and active cognitive engagement play a crucial role in mastering linguistic concepts.

c. Most Influential Strategies

Regression analysis indicated that metacognitive strategies accounted for 36% of the variance in linguistic competence scores, while cognitive strategies added another 21%. Together, these two categories explained more than half of the differences in students'

performance. Social and affective strategies, although valuable, contributed less significantly to outcomes.

Students who reported consistently planning study sessions, reviewing notes, and monitoring understanding tended to achieve the highest test scores. Conversely, students who lacked these practices often scored below the mean, even when they reported using affective or social strategies.

Detailed Discussion of Findings

a. Metacognitive Strategies as Key Predictors

The strong impact of metacognitive strategies aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of self-regulation in academic success (Oxford, 2020). Students who could organize their study time, identify weaknesses, and evaluate progress had a clear advantage. In the context of linguistics, where abstract concepts can be challenging, the ability to monitor one's comprehension is particularly critical.

b. Cognitive Engagement with Linguistic Material

Cognitive strategies such as summarizing readings, creating concept maps, and analyzing examples were strongly linked to competence in morphology and syntax. Students who actively processed information demonstrated deeper understanding of linguistic rules. These strategies encouraged higher-order thinking, moving beyond rote memorization toward application and analysis.

c. Limited Use of Affective Strategies

The relatively weak role of affective strategies may reflect cultural factors, where students prioritize task-oriented approaches over emotional regulation (Liu & Wang, 2021). However, interviews revealed that some students did struggle with anxiety, particularly during examinations. Although not statistically strong, affective strategies remain important for students who experience high stress levels.

d. Role of Social Interaction

Social strategies played a moderate role in enhancing competence, especially in pragmatics and semantics where discussion and peer collaboration are beneficial. However, limited opportunities for authentic interaction in the classroom may have restricted the effectiveness of these strategies. This finding echoes Taguchi and Roever (2019), who argue that social exposure is vital for pragmatic competence.

Thematic Insights from Interviews and Observations

Qualitative data supported the quantitative findings. Interviews revealed that high-achieving students often described their learning in terms consistent with metacognitive and cognitive strategies: planning review sessions, breaking down complex theories, and constantly checking understanding. Observations in the classroom confirmed that such students engaged actively with lectures, asked clarifying questions, and made detailed notes.

In contrast, students who struggled often admitted to inconsistent study habits and limited reflection on their learning process. They relied more heavily on last-minute memorization or emotional encouragement, which proved less effective.

Broader Implications of Findings

The findings indicate that encouraging students to adopt metacognitive and cognitive strategies can significantly enhance their mastery of linguistics. For educators, this suggests integrating explicit instruction on strategy use within the *Introduction to Linguistics* course. Assignments that require planning, monitoring, and reflection could strengthen students' self-regulation skills. Additionally, promoting collaborative projects may enhance social strategy use, while workshops on stress management could support affective development. On a broader scale, the study highlights how strategic learning behaviors mediate the relationship between instruction and competence. This contributes to the ongoing debate in applied linguistics about how best to bridge theoretical content and practical learning outcomes.

The urgency of this research lies in the persistent difficulty faced by students in mastering core areas of linguistics despite years of exposure to language learning. Linguistic competence, unlike general communicative ability, requires students to understand and apply abstract concepts such as phonemic distinctions, morphological structures, syntactic rules, and semantic relations. In many contexts, including Indonesia, students often enter university with limited preparedness to deal with the theoretical dimensions of language studies. This results in significant learning gaps, especially in courses like *Introduction to Linguistics*, where success depends not only on memorization but also on analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. The findings of this research underscore that these difficulties are not merely caused by lack of exposure, but also by limited awareness and use of effective learning strategies. By identifying which strategies most directly support linguistic competence, the study responds to the urgent call for evidence-based interventions in linguistic pedagogy.

Several factors contribute to the challenges observed in students' linguistic competence. First, many students rely on rote memorization, treating linguistics as a subject of terminology rather than analytical exploration. This approach fails to provide deep understanding and long-term retention, particularly in morphology and syntax, where pattern recognition and rule application are crucial (Nassaji, 2020). Second, socio-cultural contexts often emphasize exam performance rather than learning processes, discouraging students from experimenting with strategies that could improve understanding (Liu & Wang, 2021). Third, institutional teaching practices may not always highlight strategy training, leaving students to navigate complex linguistic content without adequate guidance (Pham & Vo, 2022).

These causes are consistent with the study's results showing that metacognitive and cognitive strategies—those most closely tied to planning, reflection, and analysis—were the strongest predictors of competence. Students who lacked these strategies often performed below average, regardless of their motivation or willingness to collaborate. Thus, the roots of the problem are not solely individual but systemic, linked to broader educational approaches that underemphasize strategic learning.

The findings suggest clear solutions to address the issues highlighted above. Metacognitive training should be integrated into linguistics curricula to help students plan their learning, monitor comprehension, and evaluate progress. For example, assignments could require students to keep reflective journals, documenting how they approached specific linguistic problems. Such practices promote self-awareness and encourage students to adjust strategies proactively.

In addition, cognitive strategies can be explicitly taught. Educators may demonstrate how to create concept maps linking phonological, morphological, and syntactic concepts, or encourage analytical exercises that involve breaking down complex sentences. These approaches empower students to engage actively with the material rather than passively consuming it.

While affective and social strategies were less directly correlated with competence, they still have a role to play. Creating supportive classroom environments where students feel safe to ask questions and share interpretations can reduce anxiety and increase engagement. Likewise, structured peer collaboration activities can strengthen social strategies, which are particularly useful in areas such as semantics and pragmatics. Thus, the solution is not to prioritize one strategy type exclusively, but to cultivate a balanced strategy repertoire among learners.

The potential impact of implementing these solutions extends beyond individual academic outcomes. At the student level, strategic learning fosters autonomy, critical thinking, and long-term retention of linguistic knowledge. These skills are transferable, benefiting students in other areas of study and in professional contexts where analytical communication is essential (Saito & Hanzawa, 2021).

At the institutional level, improved linguistic competence strengthens the reputation of academic programs, as students demonstrate higher levels of achievement and are better prepared for advanced study or employment. On a broader societal scale, equipping graduates with strong linguistic competence contributes to the development of a workforce capable of engaging with global academic and professional discourses, particularly in applied linguistics, translation, and language education. The study therefore highlights not only individual but also systemic benefits of promoting effective language learning strategies.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the direct relationship between language learning strategies and linguistic competence, rather than general language proficiency. Previous studies, such as Griffiths (2019) and Oxford (2020), demonstrated that strategy use enhances overall language performance, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, relatively little attention had been paid to how strategies affect the specific domain of linguistics, which demands analytical rather than communicative skills.

The findings of this study extend prior research by confirming that the same strategies effective in general language learning also play a decisive role in theoretical courses. Metacognitive and cognitive strategies, often linked to proficiency gains, were shown here to be equally crucial for success in mastering phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. This convergence validates the broader applicability of strategy-based instruction, while the study's context-specific insights represent a meaningful addition to the literature.

At the same time, the weaker role of affective strategies differs slightly from findings in communicative learning contexts, where motivation and emotional regulation are often strong predictors of success (Oxford, 2020). This suggests that while affective strategies are critical in developing fluency and confidence, they may not directly translate into success in linguistics courses. This distinction adds nuance to the understanding of how strategies function across different domains of language education.

From a pedagogical perspective, the significance of this study lies in its demonstration that teaching content alone is insufficient without accompanying strategy training. Linguistics is often perceived as an abstract, difficult subject, leading to high failure rates or disengagement among students. By incorporating strategy instruction, lecturers can transform how students approach learning, equipping them with tools to analyze, evaluate, and apply linguistic concepts.

For instance, lecturers might begin courses by introducing students to different strategy types, followed by workshops on applying these strategies to specific linguistic tasks. Over time, students could be encouraged to adopt strategies that align with their strengths while addressing areas of weakness. This pedagogical shift not only enhances competence but also nurtures life-long learning habits, preparing students for further academic pursuits or professional applications.

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the sample was restricted to one university, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts. Different institutions, with varied teaching practices and student demographics, may yield different results. Second, the reliance on self-reported strategy use raises the possibility of bias, as students may overestimate or underestimate their behaviors. Third, the cross-sectional design captures data at a single point in time, limiting conclusions about how strategies evolve throughout a student's academic career.

Future research could address these limitations by adopting a longitudinal design to track changes in strategy use and competence across multiple semesters. Including multiple institutions would provide broader generalizability, while incorporating experimental interventions could test the causal effects of specific strategy training programs. Furthermore, exploring how digital tools and technology-mediated learning environments interact with strategies may offer new avenues for enhancing linguistic competence in modern contexts.

The study contributes to applied linguistics by clarifying the specific ways in which learning strategies influence theoretical linguistic competence. Its novelty lies in demonstrating that metacognitive and cognitive strategies, long associated with general language proficiency, are equally powerful in mastering abstract linguistic knowledge. This challenges assumptions that strategies are primarily useful in communicative contexts and instead positions them as universal tools for learning across the spectrum of language-related disciplines.

The broader implication is that educational systems must move beyond content delivery to embrace strategy training as an integral component of instruction. Such a shift will not only enhance student achievement but also cultivate more reflective, adaptable learners capable of navigating the complexities of linguistic study and beyond.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the influence of language learning strategies on students' linguistic competence in an *Introduction to Linguistics* course, focusing on cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Findings indicated that metacognitive and cognitive strategies were most influential in enhancing mastery of linguistic principles such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, while social strategies offered moderate benefits and affective strategies had a lesser but still relevant role. This research contributes

uniquely by shifting the focus from general language proficiency to the specific domain of linguistic competence, demonstrating the value of strategy-based learning in theoretical linguistics courses and supporting the integration of explicit strategy training into curricula. Limitations included the single-institution setting and reliance on self-reported data, suggesting future research should broaden the scope to multiple universities, utilize longitudinal designs, or apply experimental interventions to establish causal effects of strategy training. Overall, the study highlights the critical role of language learning strategies in fostering linguistic competence and guides more effective, learner-centered linguistics education.

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