

Investigating university students' use of language learning strategies in learning English: a case study in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the use of language learning strategies (LLSs) among 440 university students at a Vietnamese institution, with the objective of identifying overarching patterns of strategy utilization, exploring gender-based disparities, and analyzing variances between academic year levels. The strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) served as the data collecting instrument, assessing six kinds of strategies: memory, cognitive, compensating, metacognitive, emotive, and social. Descriptive statistics indicated that students exhibited moderate-to-high levels of strategy use, with social strategies being the most prevalent and cognitive methods the least employed. Independent samples t-tests revealed no significant gender differences in strategy categories, however one-way analysis of variance or ANOVA findings showed substantial increases in strategy use by year level, with fourth-year students exhibiting the greatest usage. These results emphasize the collaborative learning inclinations within the Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) environment and accentuate the progressive nature of method use. The study enhances current research by providing fresh insights from Vietnam and underscores the need for ongoing strategy training, especially for younger students. Constraints include dependence on self-reported data and a singular institutional emphasis. Future study should use mixed methodologies and larger samples to enhance comprehension of LLS utilization in diverse contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies (LLSs) are essential for English as a foreign language or EFL learning because they boost motivation, autonomy, and language competency [1]–[4]. LLSs, which are the actions, ideas, and behaviors learners employ to acquire language, help them deal with the complexity and variety of language learning. Strategies may enhance learning results, especially in circumstances with limited target language exposure, according to decades of study [5]–[7]. Oxford's [3] strategy inventory for language learning (SILL), one of the most extensively used LLSs measurement tools, categorizes strategies into memory, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, emotional, and social categories. These categories explain how learners process and use language information. Research has shown that metacognitive and cognitive techniques help learners organize, monitor, and assess their learning and engage with language information. However, recent research has highlighted the importance of social and emotional techniques, particularly in collaborative learning situations and when peer and teacher interactions are important [8]–[10].

Many studies have evaluated EFL students' LLSs usage, revealing which tactics are most and least used. As learners plan, monitor, and assess their learning, metacognitive and cognitive techniques are the most common [11]–[13]. Saudi pupils used organizational learning and self-monitoring, indicating self-directed learning, according to Alhaysony [14]. Mulyani [15] and Lem [16] found considerable note-taking and summarizing use. Conversely, social and emotional methods, including peer collaboration and anxiety management, are the least employed [9], [17], [18]. Students' collaboration may be influenced by cultural and environmental variables [19], [20]. Social methods are preferred by extroverted learners over introverted learners [21], [22]. While most research emphasize metacognitive strategies [23], [24], some stress adaptive usage of different strategy types, supporting Oxford's [25] claim that strategy use is multifaceted and dynamic. This lengthy study shows the need to improve students' knowledge of less-used tactics to ensure a balanced language learning approach.

Gender-based differences in LLSs use have been a focal point in numerous studies, with mixed findings. Alhaysony [14] found that female students employ more metacognitive and social tactics than men. This supports Nur and Yusuf [9] and Sumarni and Rachmawaty [26], who found that females are more likely to use emotional and social tactics owing to their increased openness to cooperation and self-expression. Oxford and Nyikos [27] and Oxford and Burry-Stock [28] found that women are more likely to manage emotions and seek peer assistance. Thao *et al.* [22] argue that whereas females succeed in social and emotive dimensions, males frequently dominate in analytical cognitive techniques. In contrast, Griffiths [6] and Amerstorfer [29] discovered no significant gender-based disparities, indicating that individual learner variations may be more important. Chamot [19] and Oxford and Amerstorfer [13] address the relationship between gender, learning environment, and learner autonomy, indicating that gender may influence strategy usage but should not be considered alone.

Several research have examined how students' LLSs change with academic level, showing an increase in diversity and complexity. Bessai [17] found that third-year Algerian university students used diversified and frequent metacognitive and compensatory methods more than first-year students. Lem [16] and Nhem [30] found that older students with more language learning tasks engaged in metacognitive and social strategies, indicating that academic maturity and learning experiences encourage strategic learning. Phonhan [18] also found that upper-level Thai students were better at adapting their strategies to academic needs. These results corroborate with Rivera-Mills and Plonsky's [31] claim that language learning contexts impact strategy usage. Balci and Uguten [32] found no significant variance among year levels, suggesting contextual or institutional variables may temper such developments.

LLSs research has grown internationally, but there are few systematic investigations on LLSs in Vietnamese EFL, especially at the tertiary level. Since English is required at most Vietnamese colleges, studying how students use learning strategies is vital to enhancing teaching and results. The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of LLSs among 440 Vietnamese university students enrolled in English courses. Specifically, the study aims to: i) identify general patterns of LLSs use; ii) examine gender differences in LLSs use; and iii) explore differences in strategy use across year levels. By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to provide a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of LLSs use that can inform both pedagogical practice and future research. The research questions guiding this study are: what is the general use of LLSs among students? ii) is there a significant difference in LLSs use between males and females? and iii) is there a significant difference in LLSs use regarding year levels?

2. METHOD

2.1. Context and participants

This study was conducted at a public university located in a province in northern Vietnam in the middle of the academic year 2023-2024. The university operates under the provincial authority with a mission to provide higher education and professional training for the province and neighboring regions. It consists of two faculties (political theory, and physical education and psychology) and six departments, including foreign languages and information technology, economics, tourism, continuing education, primary and preschool education, and secondary teacher education. Training programs fall into two main categories: pedagogical (teacher education) and non-pedagogical (fields such as economics, business, tourism, and technology). The training consists of four consecutive academic years with two semesters for each year. English is a compulsory subject for all students across majors, starting from their first academic year. Within the first two years, students are required to complete three sequential general English courses (GE1, GE2, GE3), each spanning 15 weeks per semester. The university utilizes Oxford University Press's Smart Choice series (third edition) for these courses. In the next two years, there are English for specific purposes courses relevant to their major training including business English, English for accounting, English for restaurants and hotels, English for students of math, English for primary education, English for preschool education.

English education at the university traditionally follows a teacher-centered model, with large class sizes and an exam-oriented focus which is typical in Vietnam. Although communicative language teaching has been increasingly encouraged, particularly in group-based activities, most learners rely heavily on classroom instruction due to scarce opportunities for authentic communication in daily life.

This research focuses on the English learning practices of 440 male and female students across various majors and year levels within this structured academic environment. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the 440 participants in the study. Regarding gender, the majority were female, with 354 participants (80.5%), while male participants accounted for 86 individuals (19.5%). In terms of year level, first-year students made up the largest proportion, comprising 187 participants (42.5%). This was followed by 99 second-year students (22.5%), 81 third-year students (18.4%), and 73 fourth-year students (16.6%). With respect to academic majors, 234 participants (53.3%) were enrolled in pedagogical programs, while 206 participants (46.8%) were from non-pedagogical fields. These data indicate a predominantly female cohort with a balanced representation between pedagogical and non-pedagogical majors and a high concentration of first-year students.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants (N=440)

	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	86	19.5
	Female	354	80.5
Year level	First year	187	42.5
	Second year	99	22.5
	Third year	81	18.4
	Fourth year	73	16.6
Major	Pedagogical	234	53.3
	Non-pedagogical	206	46.8

2.2. Data collection instrument

The data collection tool employed in this study is the SILL, developed by Oxford [1], which is designed to investigate students' LLSs. The questionnaire consists of 50 items, systematically categorized into six main groups of strategies. The first category, memory strategies (9 items), focuses on techniques that assist learners in storing and recalling new information, such as creating mental associations, using imagery, and employing physical actions. The second category, cognitive strategies (14 items), relates to practicing and manipulating language directly, including speaking, writing, analyzing patterns, and summarizing information. Compensation strategies (6 items) enable learners to overcome gaps in their language knowledge by guessing meanings, using gestures, or rephrasing when needed. Metacognitive strategies (9 items) involve planning, organizing, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning processes, with items focusing on goal setting, self-monitoring, and seeking opportunities to use English. The fifth category, affective strategies (6 items), addresses the emotional aspects of language learning, encouraging techniques such as anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and reflective journaling. Finally, social strategies (6 items) emphasize interaction with others, encouraging learners to ask questions, seek clarification, practice with peers, and learn about cultural contexts.

The validity and reliability of the SILL instrument were carefully considered in this study. The SILL has been extensively validated across diverse EFL contexts [10], [16], [28]. Its content validity is supported by its comprehensive coverage of six major strategy categories, while its construct validity has been confirmed in multiple international studies. As shown in Table 2, the internal consistency of each category was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong reliability. These findings confirm that the SILL is a reliable and appropriate instrument for assessing students' language learning strategies. The high reliability further strengthens the credibility of the data and supports the validity of subsequent analyses.

Table 2. Cronbach's alpha of SILL categories

Categories	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Memory strategies	9	0.886
Cognitive strategies	14	0.938
Compensation strategies	6	0.862
Metacognitive strategies	9	0.928
Affective strategies	6	0.873
Social strategies	6	0.874

The web-based platform Google Forms was employed to construct the questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale was implemented for all items with 1 (never or almost never true of me), 2 (usually not true of me), 3 (somewhat true of me), 4 (usually true of me), and 5 (always or almost always true of me). The students were provided with a questionnaire link through social media groups. The questionnaire was administered during the midpoint of the academic year 2023-2024. The research purpose and plan, as well as the students' voluntary participation, were explicitly stated in the introduction section of the questionnaire. The questionnaire automatically discontinued allowing responses after one week. Consequently, 440 students completed the questionnaire.

2.3. Data analysis

In order to evaluate students' utilization of LLSs and investigate disparities in access based on variables such as gender and academic year, this investigation implemented SPSS version 20 software. Descriptive statistics summarized and categorized the general use of participants in terms of LLSs categories. The central tendencies and variability within the dataset are summarized using measures such as means and standard deviations in this method. In order to investigate gender disparities in the utilization of LLSs, independent sample t-tests were implemented. A one-way analysis of variance or ANOVA was employed to investigate the differences in students' use across different year levels (first, second, third, and fourth). This multi-method approach provides robust evidence for comprehending the strategies that participants employ in their English language learning.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Students' use of LLSs

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the SILL used in this study, based on responses from 440 university students. The results show the mean scores and standard deviations for six categories of language learning strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Among the six strategy categories, social strategies recorded the highest mean score ($M=3.2848$, $SD=0.90831$), indicating that students most frequently used strategies involving interaction with others (e.g., asking questions or cooperating with peers). This suggests that learners tend to value social engagement in their language learning process. Compensation strategies followed closely with a mean of 3.2534 ($SD=0.89098$), showing that students also often used techniques to guess meanings or overcome limitations in their English proficiency. On the other hand, cognitive strategies had the lowest mean score ($M=3.1771$, $SD=0.87767$), reflecting less frequent use of strategies that involve practicing, analyzing, or reasoning with the language. Similarly, memory strategies and affective strategies had relatively low mean scores of 3.1949 and 3.1920 respectively, suggesting moderate use. The overall average across all strategy categories was 3.2180 ($SD=0.89816$), indicating a moderate level of language learning strategy use among the participants. The standard deviations across categories ranged from approximately 0.86 to 0.93, implying a fairly consistent pattern of strategy use across individuals.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of SILL categories

Categories	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Memory strategies	440	3.1949	.86003
Cognitive strategies	440	3.1771	.87767
Compensation strategies	440	3.2534	.89098
Metacognitive strategies	440	3.2058	.92970
Affective strategies	440	3.1920	.92228
Social strategies	440	3.2848	.90831
Average	440	3.2180	.89816

The results revealed that students employed all six categories of LLSs at a moderate-to-high level, with social strategies ($M=3.28$) being the most frequently used and cognitive strategies ($M=3.17$) the least. This pattern contrasts with a substantial body of prior research, which has typically identified metacognitive and cognitive strategies as the most dominant [11], [12], [13]. Alhaysony [14] and Lem [16] found high reliance on strategies like self-monitoring, organizing learning, and summarization, underscoring students' tendency toward self-directed learning. However, the present study aligns more closely with Thao *et al.* [22] and Nur and Yusuf [9], who highlighted the significant role of social strategies, especially in collaborative or communicative learning environments. The prominence of social strategies here could reflect specific contextual factors of the Vietnamese EFL setting, where classroom interaction, collaboration, group harmony and peer support are

culturally encouraged. Students often rely on classmates for clarification, practice, and encouragement, aligning with cultural expectations of cooperation. It also points to students' active engagement in seeking clarification, practicing with peers, and utilizing communicative opportunities—key elements of effective language acquisition as emphasized by Oxford [25]. Conversely, the lower use of cognitive strategies, though consistent with Mulyani [15] and Lem [16] in some respects, raises concerns, as these strategies are critical for deeper processing and internalization of language input. This suggests a potential gap in students' strategy repertoires, indicating that more explicit cognitive strategy training may be beneficial.

3.2. Gender differences in students' use of LLSs

Table 4 presents the results of an independent sample t-test conducted to examine gender differences in the use of LLSs across six categories. The participants consisted of 86 male and 354 female students. The results indicate that male students reported slightly higher mean scores than female students across all strategy categories. Specifically, male students had higher mean scores in memory strategies ($M=3.2403$), cognitive strategies ($M=3.2434$), compensation strategies ($M=3.3441$), metacognitive strategies ($M=3.2661$), affective strategies ($M=3.2190$), and social strategies ($M=3.3721$), compared to female students whose respective mean scores were 3.1839, 3.1610, 3.2321, 3.1911, 3.1855, and 3.2637. Despite these slight variations, none of the differences were found to be statistically significant, as all p-values were greater than 0.05. This indicates that there is no significant difference between male and female students in their use of any of the six language learning strategy categories measured by the SILL. Overall, the findings suggest that gender does not play a determining role in the frequency or type of language learning strategies used by the participants in this study.

The independent samples t-test results revealed no statistically significant gender differences in the use of language learning strategies across all categories. Although male students reported slightly higher mean scores than females in every strategy category, the differences were not significant ($p>0.05$). This finding echoes the results of Amerstorfer [29] and Griffiths [6], who similarly found no meaningful gender-based disparities, emphasizing that individual learner differences and contextual variables may outweigh gender as a determining factor. Interestingly, the current results diverge from studies such as Alhaysony [14] and Nur and Yusuf [9], who reported significant gender-based differences, typically showing females as more inclined toward metacognitive, social, and affective strategies. One plausible explanation for the absence of gender effects in the present study may be the shared academic environment and similar learning experiences of the male and female participants, which could have minimized gendered learning behaviors [13], [19]. This suggests that in the given context, strategy instruction can be designed without gender-specific differentiation, focusing instead on individual learner needs.

Table 4. Independent sample t test results on gender

Categories	Gender	N	Mean	Std. deviation	p-value
Memory strategies	Male	86	3.2403	.85318	.586
	Female	354	3.1839	.86253	.584
Cognitive strategies	Male	86	3.2434	.90791	.436
	Female	354	3.1610	.87072	.448
Compensation strategies	Male	86	3.3411	.91641	.310
	Female	354	3.2321	.88470	.321
Metacognitive strategies	Male	86	3.2661	1.03775	.503
	Female	354	3.1911	.90250	.539
Affective strategies	Male	86	3.2190	.99188	.763
	Female	354	3.1855	.90593	.776
Social strategies	Male	86	3.3721	.99629	.321
	Female	354	3.2637	.88584	.357

3.3. Students' use of LLSs by year levels

Tables 5-7 present the results of the analysis of students' use of LLSs across different year levels. Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics of students' language learning strategy use across different year levels. The results show a clear upward trend: first-year students had the lowest mean score ($M=3.0247$, $SD=0.57155$), while fourth-year students reported the highest mean score ($M=3.6367$, $SD=0.79387$). The mean scores for second year and third-year students were 3.1410 and 3.3341, respectively. This indicates that as students advance through their academic years, their use of language learning strategies increases progressively.

To determine whether these differences were statistically significant, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The results in Table 6 indicate statistically significant differences in strategy use across the four-year levels. The analysis yielded an F-value of 11.554 with a p-value of 0.000, indicating a highly

significant difference between groups at the 0.05 level. This suggests that year level is a significant factor influencing the use of language learning strategies among students.

Table 7 shows the results of the Tukey HSD post hoc test, which further explores which specific year-level comparisons showed significant differences. The findings reveal a significant difference between first year and third-year students (mean difference=-0.30937, $p=0.045$), a highly significant difference between first year and fourth-year students (mean difference=-0.61201, $p=0.000$), and a significant difference between second year and fourth-year students (mean difference=-0.49570, $p=0.002$). These results confirm that fourth-year students use language learning strategies significantly more than students in lower years, particularly when compared to first- and second-year students.

The study uncovered a significant upward trend in the use of language learning strategies across academic years, with fourth-year students reporting the highest levels of strategy use ($M=3.63$), followed by third-year, second year, and first-year students, respectively. The one-way ANOVA confirmed that these differences were statistically significant ($p<0.05$), with post hoc tests indicating significant contrasts especially between lower-year and senior students. This developmental trajectory aligns well with findings by Lem [16], Bessai [17], and Rivera-Mills and Plonsky [31], who argued that language learning strategy use becomes more sophisticated and diverse as learners gain academic maturity and exposure to varied language tasks. The progressive increase in strategy use suggests that students accumulate strategic knowledge and refine their learning techniques over time, likely due to greater academic demands and expanded learning experiences. This trend reinforces the idea that strategy use is developmental in nature [18], [30]. However, the relatively low strategy uses among first- and second-year students highlights a need for early and sustained strategy training in university programs. Incorporating structured LLSs instruction in the initial years may help younger students accelerate their strategic competence, thereby enhancing their overall language proficiency from the outset.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for students' use of LLSs by year levels

Year levels	N	Mean	Std. deviation
First year	187	3.0247	.57155
Second year	99	3.1410	.96191
Third year	81	3.3341	.95356
Fourth year	73	3.6367	.79387
Total	440	3.2094	.81415

Table 6. One-way ANOVA summary table for differences in LLSs by year levels

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	21.430	3	7.143	11.554	.000
Within groups	269.555	436	.618		
Total	290.985	439			

Table 7. Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons for LLSs usage by year levels

Comparison	Mean difference	Sig.
First year vs third year	-.30937*	.045
First year vs fourth year	-.61201*	.000
Second year vs fourth year	-.49570*	.002

Note: *The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated language learning strategies (LLSs) among 440 Vietnamese university students, focusing on general patterns, gender differences, and year-level variations. The findings indicate that students employed LLSs at moderate to high levels, with social strategies being the most frequently used and cognitive strategies the least. No significant gender differences were found, while strategy use increased with academic progression. These results highlight the importance of promoting a balanced use of strategies, particularly enhancing cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Pedagogically, integrating collaborative activities and explicit strategy instruction can support students' engagement and foster more effective and autonomous learning. Early-year students, in particular, would benefit from structured strategy training to build a strong foundation. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data and a single institutional context. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches and broader samples to gain deeper insights into learners' strategic behavior across contexts.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nterpretation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : **O**riginal Draft

E : **E**xperimentation

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [PDT], upon reasonable request.




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