

# Language learning strategies and communicative competence of Colombian learners of English as a foreign language

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## ABSTRACT

Even when proficiency in foreign languages has emerged as a critical skill to foster academic, professional, and personal growth, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the relation between language learning strategies (LLS) and communicative competence in English among Colombian high school students. This investigation used an explanatory correlational design to explore the connections between LLS and the communicative competence of 123 eleventh graders within the Colombian context. Data collected employing an inventory and the results of the English section of a standardized test in Colombia were subjected to analysis. The findings suggest that students favor social strategies, whereas affective strategies are used to a lesser extent. Additionally, there is a moderate positive correlation between the overall use of LLS and learners' communicative competence in English. Particularly, cognitive and metacognitive strategies emerged as the strategies that contribute most significantly to students' language proficiency. Conversely, memory and affective strategies were found to have the weakest correlation with learners' language learning success. This study accentuates the importance of strategies-based instruction to boost language proficiency and outlines recommendations for future research.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies (LLS) encompass actions deliberately or automatically selected to facilitate or regulate the learning process, whose effectiveness may depend on a complex interaction of their quantity, frequency, and coordination [1], [2]. These strategies, which learners select based on personal and contextual factors, are aimed at achieving language-related tasks, improving language performance, and enhancing long-term proficiency [3], [4]. Rubin [5] popularized the concept of LLS, emphasizing the importance of conscious efforts made by language learners to improve their language proficiency. Subsequent research, particularly by Oxford [6], expanded the understanding of LLS and provided a taxonomy recognized as one of the most prominent and influential in the field of LLS, which classifies LLS into six distinct groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. For Cohen and Weaver [7], LLS can be delineated into distinct categories corresponding to specific language skills, including listening and reading, in the case of receptive abilities, alongside productive skills like speaking and writing. Moreover, skill-related strategies that extend across all four skill domains are identified, encompassing strategies related to vocabulary acquisition and translation. The initial efforts aimed at identifying, categorizing, and assessing

strategic behaviors in language learning, as well as the roles of teachers in fostering these strategies, have now matured into a well-established construct within applied linguistics [8].

The relevance of LLS extends to various linguistic fields, including communicative competence, which encompasses the ability to use a language effectively and appropriately in social contexts [9], [10]. The concept of communicative competence was originally introduced by Hymes [11] to challenge the prevailing notion that language proficiency solely consisted of grammatical competence. Canale and Swain [12] articulated a more detailed framework that includes four primary dimensions: grammatical (linguistic), sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. This comprehensive model underscores the multifaceted nature of language use, emphasizing not only the accuracy of grammatical structures but also the ability to use these structures appropriately in different social contexts, to organize coherent messages, and to employ strategies for overcoming communication breakdowns.

Strategic learners are positively associated with high levels of academic achievement [3], [13]–[17]. In line with this perspective, Bećirović *et al.* [18] explored whether the use of learning strategies significantly predicted academic achievement in a group of 206 high school students in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The research examined how the choice of LLS varied in accordance with academic achievement, gender, and grade level. The study indicated that cognitive strategies exerted a significant positive influence on learners' achievement, while compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies had a modest positive impact on academic attainment. Conversely, memory and affective strategies emerged as negative predictors of language proficiency. Similarly, Alfian [19] observed a linear relationship between proficiency level and the utilization of strategy among a sample of 288 undergraduates. As proficiency levels increased, there was a corresponding increase in the adoption of strategies. Specifically, high achievers demonstrated a greater frequency of employing metacognitive and social strategies. However, the relationship between language proficiency and affective and memory strategies was deemed insignificant. Furthermore, in a study that explored the relationship between LLS and achievement among EFL undergraduates, Abdul-Ghafour [20] found that compensation and metacognitive strategies correlated positively with language achievement. As a further example, Sukying [21] delved into the relationship between LLS and English proficiency, exploring how the two factors interact, finding that individuals with higher levels of English proficiency tend to utilize LLS more frequently.

In the Colombian context, there has been a burgeoning interest in the efficacy of strategies-based instructional approaches, as evidenced by recent scholarly inquiries [22]. Alvarez-Ayure *et al.* [23] conducted a study aimed at identifying the impact of metacognitive and vocabulary learning strategies on the performance of 30 eighth-grade students in a vocabulary learning task. The study highlighted the importance of explicit LLS instruction to enhance affective domains, metacognitive processes, and overall autonomy in learning endeavors. Similarly, Peñuela [24] sought to assess the efficacy of employing three distinct metacognitive strategies (overviewing, goal setting, and self-evaluating) in heightening the awareness of stress and intonation among 10 adult learners. The outcomes elucidated a three-fold developmental process encompassing metalinguistic comprehension, learning efficacy, and self-awareness. In a study investigating the efficacy of metacognitive strategies in helping beginning learners facing challenges in increasing and retaining vocabulary, Diaz [25] found that the instruction of metacognitive strategies like planning, monitoring, and evaluating yielded positive outcomes concerning students' vocabulary by enriching the metacognitive process and fostering greater autonomy among learners. As a further example, Pérez and Alvira [26] delved into the implications of applying three vocabulary strategies in the learning of new vocabulary, namely the use of word cards, association with pictures, and association with a topic. The findings showed the efficacy of these strategies to broaden the participants' lexicon over time and improve their capabilities to recall vocabulary.

Understanding how students employ various strategies to learn English and the extent to which these strategies correlate with their levels of communicative competence in English is essential for designing tailored language education programs and interventions. In the Colombian context, which is characterized by the importance ascribed to foreign language proficiency for academic, professional, and personal development, there exists a discernible gap in understanding the specific strategies favored by high school students in their pursuit of English language acquisition. Further exploration is needed to identify the relationship between learners' favored LLS and their communicative competence in English. Thus, this paper presents the outcomes of a study aimed at examining the strategies employed by eleventh-grade students within the context of Colombia and their correlation with communicative competence in English, shedding light on the strategies that facilitate or hinder effective communication. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

- i) What strategies are preferred by eleventh-grade Colombian students to learn English as a foreign language?
- ii) How does the selection of LLS relate to the communicative competence in English of eleventh graders in Colombia?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research design

In this investigation, an explanatory correlational research design was adopted to explore the relationship between the use of LLS and the communicative competence in English of eleventh graders within the Colombian context [27]. This approach allowed the investigation to identify the degree to which the variables co-varied, meaning that changes in one variable were associated with changes in another. Two sets of data collected employing an inventory and a test of proficiency in English were subjected to analysis to explore the extent to which variations in the adoption of LLS correlated with changes in the participants' communicative competence in English.

### 2.2. Participants

This study used a nonprobability sampling approach to investigate the links between the use of LLS and the communicative competence in English of learners at the secondary school level [27]. Upon obtaining authorization from the school boards and securing informed consents from participants who volunteered to partake in this investigation, this research involved the analysis of data from 123 eleventh graders at two public schools in Bogota (65 females and 58 males), whose ages ranged from 15 to 19 years. The data encompassed information about students' motivations to learn English and their perceived English proficiency by placing themselves on a four-point scale from "excellent" to "poor" in comparison to their colleagues. Although the expected level of communicative competence in English for students who finish high school in Colombia is B1, most participants positioned themselves on the "poor" and "fair" levels of the scale. Most students highlighted the importance of learning English to develop professionally, travel, and study in a foreign country. Table 1 summarizes the number and levels of English proficiency of students participating in this research.

Table 1. Distribution of students according to their communicative competence in English

Participants	Proficiency	%
25	A-	20.3
56	A1	45.5
28	A2	22.8
14	B1 and B+	11.4

### 2.3. Data collection and analysis

In this correlational study, two sets of data were collected with the use of Oxford's [6] strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) and the English section of the SABER 11 test. The SILL, which has attained prominence in the field of LLS [28], [29], uses a 50-item structure and a 5-point Likert scale to measure how frequently six types of strategies to learn English are used, including memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. The use of these strategies can be described as "high" if the mean value of the reported use of strategies ranges between 3.5 and 5.0, "medium" for mean values between 2.5 and 3.4, and "low" for mean values between 1.0 to 2.4. The questionnaire was translated into the participants' native language, Spanish, and modifications to certain items were made for enhanced comprehensibility [30]. This instrument demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability across all subscales assessing specific types of strategies: memory ( $\alpha=.802$ ), cognitive ( $\alpha=.909$ ), compensation ( $\alpha=.713$ ), metacognitive ( $\alpha=.873$ ), affective ( $\alpha=.713$ ), and social ( $\alpha=.747$ ). Regarding the SABER 11 test (a standardized test high schoolers in Colombia are subjected to at the end of the secondary education stage), it uses 55 items to assess students' communicative competence in English according to the levels A- (for scores up to 47), A1 (for scores between 48 and 57), A2 (for scores ranging from 58 to 67), B1 (for scores from 68 to 78), and B+ (for results ranging from 79 to 100). A total of 123 survey responses from students were considered for analysis. A pearson product-moment correlation was calculated to evaluate the relationship between students' use of LLS and their communicative competence in English. The pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was considered weak for values between 0 and .3, moderate for values ranging from .3 to .5, and strong for values greater than .5.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study intended to identify the strategies eleventh graders in the Colombian context use to learn English and how these strategies relate to their levels of communicative competence. To achieve this objective, the reported use of LLS assessed with the aid of the SILL and the results of the English section of the SABER 11 test were analyzed. The results, presented in this section, are divided into two parts: a

description of the LLS used by eleventh graders within the Colombian context and an exploration of the relationships between these strategies and learners' communicative competence in English.

### 3.1. The reported use of language learning strategies

Survey respondents reported a diverse array of LLS in their English language learning. The overall utilization of LLS by participants falls within the medium range, with all six assessed strategy types in the SILL demonstrating mean scores ranging from 2.76 to 3.38. Remarkably, social strategies ( $M=3.38$ ), compensation strategies ( $M=3.13$ ), and metacognitive strategies ( $M=3.10$ ) emerged as more frequently employed, whereas affective strategies ( $M=2.76$ ) exhibited a comparatively lower prevalence among the respondents. The reported use of LLS is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The reported use of LLS

Strategy type	$M(SD)$
Memory	2.98 (0.68)
Cognitive	3.08 (0.79)
Compensation	3.13 (0.69)
Metacognitive	3.10 (0.73)
Affective	2.76 (0.79)
Social	3.38 (0.79)
Overall LLS use	3.07 (0.62)

The study participants disclosed a moderate use of memory strategies ( $M=2.98$ ) and reported the tendency to create mental associations between previous knowledge and new information in English ( $M=3.46$ ) as well as the utilization of imagery ( $M=3.40$ ). Conversely, students informed less frequent implementation of strategies such as the utilization of flashcards for memorizing new English vocabulary ( $M=2.20$ ) and the use of rhymes to represent sounds in memory ( $M=2.28$ ). Concerning cognitive strategies ( $M=3.08$ ), emphasis was placed on comparing elements in the new language with those in their native language ( $M=3.62$ ), practicing English sounds ( $M=3.39$ ), and using English words into common phrases or more structured sentences ( $M=3.41$ ). The participants reported that reading for pleasure ( $M=2.67$ ) and writing in English ( $M=2.61$ ) were employed less frequently. Students indicated a medium use of compensation strategies ( $M=3.13$ ). The surveyed learners indicated a high use of strategies like guessing intelligently the meaning of unfamiliar English words by using linguistic or other clues ( $M=3.63$ ) and incorporating mime or gesture to facilitate their communication in English ( $M=3.27$ ). Metacognitive strategies were used at a medium level ( $M=3.10$ ), with high use of specific strategies related to listening attentively to speakers of English ( $M=3.93$ ) and seeking ways to become a more effective English learner ( $M=3.67$ ). On the contrary, the least employed strategy within this category was related to planning a schedule to study English ( $M=2.24$ ). While learners reported a medium use of affective strategies ( $M=2.76$ ), strategies like assessing their emotional temperature ( $M=2.28$ ) and keeping a learning diary to record their feelings during English learning ( $M=1.68$ ) were not commonly employed. Social strategies were found to be the most frequently used strategies ( $M=3.38$ ). The participants reported that they frequently ask others for repetition ( $M=3.72$ ), clarification ( $M=3.64$ ), and correction ( $M=3.58$ ). Even though the reported use of LLS was categorized as medium in most cases, as mean values did not exceed the threshold of 3.5, the selection of LLS varied according to the levels of communicative competence in English. Table 3 shows that, in general, students with higher scores in the SABER 11 test ( $N=14$ ) reported a higher selection of strategies ( $M=3.55$ ), whereas learners whose results fall within the A- level ( $N=25$ ) reported the lowest use of LLS in most strategy types.

Table 3. The reported use of LLS and levels of communicative competence

Strategy type	A- $M(SD)$	A1 $M(SD)$	A2 $M(SD)$	B1+ $M(SD)$
Memory	2.83 (0.81)	2.95 (0.66)	3.20 (0.57)	2.99 (0.67)
Cognitive	2.77 (0.83)	2.89 (0.62)	3.40 (0.77)	3.85 (0.73)
Compensation	2.77 (0.70)	3.04 (0.62)	3.47 (0.60)	3.51 (0.74)
Metacognitive	2.83 (0.81)	2.93 (0.55)	3.34 (0.69)	3.83 (0.80)
Affective	2.74 (0.88)	2.60 (0.68)	2.96 (0.83)	3.07 (0.84)
Social	3.15 (0.79)	3.26 (0.75)	3.63 (0.77)	3.82 (0.80)
Overall, LLS use	2.83 (0.73)	2.94 (0.48)	3.34 (0.61)	3.55 (0.61)

Table 3 illustrates that low-achieving students reported a medium use of LLS in all the strategy categories assessed in the SILL. These participants rely on social strategies ( $M=3.15$ ) more often, whereas

their use of cognitive strategies ( $M=2.77$ ) and metacognitive strategies ( $M=2.83$ ) differed significantly in comparison with high achievers' use of strategies. Regarding students who attained the expected level of communicative competence in the SABER test, they reported high use of various strategy types, with particular emphasis placed on cognitive strategies ( $M=3.85$ ), metacognitive strategies ( $M=3.83$ ), and social strategies ( $M=3.82$ ).

### 3.2. Language learning strategies and communicative competence in English

A Person product-moment correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationships between the participants' communicative competence in English and their selection of LLS. The results of these correlations are detailed in Table 4. It is revealing that the reported use of LLS was positively associated with the participants' results in the SABER 11 test at the  $p<.01$  level. Overall, learners' use of LLS was moderately positively related to their English communicative competence,  $r(121)=.38$ ,  $p<.001$ . According to these findings, cognitive strategies,  $r(121)=.46$ ,  $p<.001$ , and metacognitive strategies,  $r(121)=.42$ ,  $p<.001$ , explain much more the variability in the participants' communicative competence in English. Conversely, in the case of memory strategies,  $r(121)=.12$ ,  $p<.207$ , and affective strategies,  $r(121)=.14$ ,  $p<.127$ , their correlations with high results in the SABER 11 test were weak, not reaching statistical significance.

Table 4. The correlations between LLS and communicative competence

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social	LLS
SABER test	.12	.46**	.35**	.42**	.14	.27**	.38**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.207	.000	.000	.000	.127	.003	.000

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

The stronger correlations for cognitive and metacognitive strategies suggest that these types of strategies may be particularly beneficial for language learners. Cognitive strategies, which involve direct manipulation of the language, and metacognitive strategies, which involve planning and monitoring of learning, appear to be more closely linked to language proficiency. In general, in the case of high achievers, their high levels of communicative competence could be related to their use of specific cognitive strategies, such as practicing formally with sounds in English ( $M=4.36$ ) and practicing naturalistically ( $M=4.71$ ) by using English for and from realistic settings, such as listening to authentic resources, participating in conversations, reading, and watching contents. Although these strategies are used among learners with various levels of communicative competence, high achievers surpassed other learners significantly with mean differences ranging from 1.20 to 1.99. Likewise, two metacognitive strategies that high achievers tend to use are related to checking their English learning by self-monitoring ( $M=4.50$ ) and centering their language learning by paying attention ( $M=4.71$ ). These findings are congruent with the outcomes reported by Sisquiarco *et al.* [31], who assessed the impact of feedback based on cognitive and metacognitive strategies and described that these strategies boosted learners' confidence and their preparation for oral tasks. Alvarez-Ayure *et al.* [23] also underscored some key aspects of employing metacognitive strategies and their positive impact on affective aspects such as beliefs in, engagement with, and attitudes toward vocabulary acquisition. Overall, these findings underline the pivotal role of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in enhancing communicative competence in English, suggesting a strategic focus that could potentially yield significant improvements in learners' ability to communicate effectively in English.

The weak correlations for memory and affective strategies raise questions about their relative importance in the Colombian context. While memory strategies are traditionally considered fundamental for vocabulary acquisition, their limited association with overall communicative competence suggests that they may play a minor role in more advanced stages of language learning or the development of communicative skills. Concerning this category, high achievers reported high use of strategies like using imagery ( $M=4.07$ ) and placing new words into contexts ( $M=3.71$ ). Strategies like representing sounds in memory ( $M=1.86$ ), exemplified using rhymes, and using mechanical techniques ( $M=1.57$ ), as in the case of flashcards, did not show a positive relationship with high levels of communicative competence in English. Similarly, the low correlation observed for affective strategies could indicate that emotional and motivational aspects, while important, may not directly translate into higher proficiency levels in a standardized test setting [32]. In this category, strategies related to taking risks wisely and seeking ways to relax and reduce anxiety were favored by high-achieving learners, whereas keeping a language learning diary ( $M=1.50$ ) was the least used. These outcomes support the findings reported by Bećirović *et al.* [18], who claimed that cognitive strategies positively predict students' academic success in EFL, whereas memory and affective strategies are negatively associated with achievement. Additionally, the outcomes partially align with Sukying's [21] study, which

indicated that affective strategies were utilized in initial stages of language learning. The low correlation observed for memory and affective strategies suggest that these strategies might be more beneficial in the early stages of language acquisition, for instance, for vocabulary retention and the creation of a supportive learning environment but may not directly impact language proficiency as measured by standardized tests.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to describe the strategies to learn English used by eleventh-grade students within the Colombian context and explore how these strategies correlate with their levels of communicative competence in English. For this purpose, data collected with the SILL allowed the identification of the participants' overall preference toward using social strategies, while affective strategies were found to be used to a lesser extent. While acknowledging the presence of limitations within the research, this study showed that there are certainly preferences in the selection of strategies based on the participants' levels of communicative competence in English. High achievers leaned toward using cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies more often, whereas learners with lower levels of communicative competence in English seemed to be more dependent on social and compensation strategies. The study showed a moderate positive correlation between the overall use of LLS and learners' proficiency in English. Specifically, cognitive and metacognitive strategies were identified as the primary contributors to students' language proficiency. In contrast, the correlations between memory and affective strategies and high scores on the SABER 11 test were weak and did not achieve statistical significance. Therefore, this investigation underscores the importance of providing explicit instruction on certain types of LLS that demonstrate greater effectiveness, offering training for both teachers and learners to enhance their use and promotion, and examining the influence of teachers' instructions on students' choices of strategies.

Certainly, the Colombian context presents numerous facets of LLS and communicative competence in English that extend beyond the scope of this research. Firstly, while this study explored the association between these two variables, other aspects exerting some impact on learners' communicative competence in English and their learning strategies preferences, such as self-regulation, autonomy, personality traits, and learning styles, require further exploration. Secondly, this investigation focused on the favored LLS of a conveniently selected sample of eleventh graders in traditional learning scenarios; therefore, studying participants from various grade levels and learning environments may yield diverse and complementary outcomes. Thirdly, given the research design adopted in this study, data collection occurred at a single point in time, providing only a snapshot of the situation at that moment. Consequently, longitudinal investigations are recommended to dynamically explore how potential shifts in learners' strategy preferences might influence their long-term development of communicative competence. Regarding this aspect, mixed methods studies could aid a comprehensive exploration of other variables that could be positively associated with learners' levels of communicative competence in English and their choice of LLS. As a part of LLS that requires more exploration, research should explore the impact of teachers' instructions on students' strategy selection. Further studies should delve into the significance of teachers' roles and their instructional approaches in fostering the use of LLS within EFL contexts.




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