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EXPLORING STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AT HO CHI MINH CITY UNIVERSITY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORTS

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Abstract

This study explores the language learning strategies employed by students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Physical Education and Sports, using both quantitative and qualitative approach grounded in Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Data were initially collected by surveying 342 students, followed by in-depth interviews with 20 purposefully selected participants to gain a richer understanding of their strategy use. Thematic analysis revealed a strong preference for memory and metacognitive strategies, while cognitive and affective strategies were used less frequently. These findings offer concrete insights into how target students employ language learning strategies, with a particular preference for metacognitive and memory strategies due to limited study time and exam-focused instruction. Qualitative data further revealed that motivation, perceived language needs, and personal goals strongly influenced strategy use. Based on these findings, the study recommends incorporating strategy-based instruction into the curriculum, with a focus on raising awareness of practical strategies and linking them to students' real-life goals. These results inform English language educators and curriculum developers in designing more context-sensitive and goal-oriented English programs for students in Vietnam's physical education and sports specialized institutions.

Keywords: *Language learning strategies, SILL, sports education.*

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KHÁM PHÁ CHIẾN LƯỢC HỌC TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM THỂ DỤC THỂ THAO THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH

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Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu này kết hợp cả phương pháp định lượng và định tính nhằm khám phá các chiến lược học tiếng Anh mà sinh viên Trường Đại học Sư Phạm Thể Dục Thể thao Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh áp dụng, dựa trên bộ công cụ Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) của Oxford (1990). Dữ liệu ban đầu được thu thập thông qua khảo sát 342 sinh viên, tiếp theo là phỏng vấn chuyên sâu 20 người được lựa chọn có chủ đích nhằm hiểu rõ hơn cách các sinh viên sử dụng các chiến lược học tập ngôn ngữ tiếng Anh. Kết quả phân tích theo chủ đề cho thấy sinh viên tại khu vực nghiên cứu đã ưu tiên sử dụng các chiến lược trí nhớ và siêu nhận thức, trong khi chiến lược nhận thức và tình cảm ít được sử dụng hơn. Các phát hiện này chỉ ra rằng việc ưu tiên chiến lược siêu nhận thức và trí nhớ chủ yếu xuất phát từ quỹ thời gian học tập hạn chế và việc tập trung của học tập và giảng dạy phục vụ cho các vào kỳ thi. Dữ liệu định tính cũng cho thấy động lực học tập, nhu cầu ngôn ngữ được nhận thức và mục tiêu cá nhân có ảnh hưởng mạnh mẽ đến việc lựa chọn và áp dụng chiến lược. Trên cơ sở đó, nghiên cứu đưa ra khuyến nghị việc tích hợp các hướng dẫn dựa trên chiến lược vào chương trình giảng dạy, chú trọng nâng cao nhận thức về các chiến lược hiệu quả và gắn kết chúng với mục tiêu thực tế của sinh viên. Những kết quả này là cơ sở tham khảo quan trọng cho các giảng viên tiếng Anh và nhà phát triển chương trình đào tạo khi xây dựng các chương trình giảng dạy tiếng Anh phù hợp với bối cảnh và định hướng mục tiêu cho sinh viên tại các cơ sở đào tạo thể chất và thể thao chuyên nghiệp ở Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Chiến lược học ngôn ngữ, giáo dục thể thao, khám phá, Trường Đại học Sư phạm Thể dục Thể thao thành phố Hồ Chí Minh.

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, English proficiency is a valuable skill for students across all disciplines, including those in technical and specialized fields, and physical education is not the exception. As the sports field becomes increasingly globalized, students majoring in physical education are expected to engage with international research, participate in global sports events, and collaborate with professionals and athletes from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Whether accessing sports science publications, following coaching certification courses in English, or communicating during international exchange programs, English proficiency plays a vital role in their future academic and career success. Despite this growing demand, physical education students are often overlooked in English education research, which tends to focus more on English majors or general university learners.

It is a fact that non-English majors—particularly those in specialized disciplines such as sports education—face significant challenges in acquiring the language. These include limited classroom exposure (Dong, 2022; Nguyen & Trang, 2024; Pham & Nguyen, 2021; Poudel & Thapa, 2022; Tran & Tran, 2020), low motivation (Dang & Ha, 2021; Ketchumpol & Sarobol, 2021; Rohmawati et al., 2024), negative attitudes toward English (Tran et al., 2021), insufficient learning support tailored to their major (Benyoucef, 2024), and time constraints due to rigorous physical training schedules (Dunifa, 2023). These barriers often result in low confidence and poor communication skills, further widening the gap between their English needs and actual performance.

In this context, language learning strategies (LLSs) offer a promising solution. By applying effective strategies, students can enhance learning efficiency (Lestari & Wahyudin, 2020), develop autonomy (Lee & Heinz, 2016), and build confidence (Han, 2016). Implementing these strategies enables physical education majors to strengthen their communication skills, gain access to global knowledge (Mulasari, 2023; Tsai, 2011), and increase their competitiveness in both academic and professional environments. While several studies have examined the role of language learning strategies among general student populations, a notable gap remains in research on how students in sports-focused disciplines engage with strategic learning. This study addresses that gap by focusing on students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Physical Education and Sports (UPES), offering insights into their English learning strategy use and its implications for teaching and curriculum development.

At this university, English language learning remains a challenge for students. All first-year students are required to study Basic English; however, a considerable number struggle with confidence in grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Psychological barriers further impede their ability to acquire the language effectively. To better understand how UPES students navigate the English learning process, this study conducts research using Oxford's (1990) SILL. By analyzing students' use of LLSs, this research aims to identify their learning behaviors, preferences, and challenges, contributing to the development of more effective instructional methods and support systems.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1. What are the most and least frequently used English LLSs among UPES students?*
- 2. What are students' perceptions toward the use of English LLSs based on SILL?*

This study explores the LLSs employed by UPES students with SILL as a framework. Gaining insights into how these students approach language learning is crucial for understanding their learning behaviors, difficulties, and the effectiveness of different

strategies. These findings can inform the lecturer at UPES in designing targeted instructional methods that aim to promote autonomous learning and improve English proficiency. In addition, it also contributes to the broader field of language education by providing qualitative insights into the practical application of LLSs, especially in an academic context that focuses on training in physical education.

The paper is structured as follows: The Introduction outlines the research background, objectives, and significance of the study. The Literature Review examines key theories related to language learning strategies and previous studies utilizing SILL. The Methodology section describes the qualitative approach, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis methods. The Findings section presents the key themes that emerged from participant interviews, while the Discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing research. Finally, the Conclusion and Implications summarize the study's key insights, highlight pedagogical issues, and suggest directions for future research.

2. Theoretical overview, research history, and hypothesis development

2.1. Defining and Theorizing Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies (LLSs) refer to the thoughts, actions, and behaviors that learners deliberately use to facilitate the acquisition of a second or foreign language. According to Oxford (1990), LLSs are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p. 8). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) similarly defined strategies as mental operations used by learners to process information and enhance comprehension, retention, and language use—emphasizing the roles of both cognitive and metacognitive activity.

Oxford's (1990) taxonomy remains the most widely cited and implemented framework. She classified strategies into six groups:

- Memory strategies – linking new information with mental images or prior knowledge.
- Cognitive strategies – practicing, analyzing, summarizing, and reasoning with language.
- Compensation strategies – using guessing or circumlocution when faced with gaps.
- Metacognitive strategies – planning, organizing, and evaluating one's own learning.
- Affective strategies – managing feelings and attitudes.
- Social strategies – engaging with others to learn collaboratively.

Despite its influence, Oxford's taxonomy has not been without critique. Dörnyei (2005) questioned the theoretical clarity and empirical distinction between specific categories, primarily cognitive and metacognitive strategies. He argued that the boundaries were often blurred, and that many learners, particularly in teacher-centered systems like Vietnam, may not distinguish them in practice. This raises questions about how learners internalize and apply these distinctions, particularly when they are not explicitly trained to do so.

Adding to this critique, Veenman (2011) highlighted the difficulty of reliably measuring metacognitive strategy use, arguing that many learners are unaware of their own thinking processes and thus cannot accurately report them. This issue is magnified in cultures where reflective and autonomous learning is not strongly encouraged, such as in Vietnam, where teacher authority and passive learning traditions prevail.

To complement Oxford's taxonomy, Vandergrift (1999) developed a model of

metacognitive listening strategies that highlights planning, monitoring, and evaluating receptive skill development. His framework provides task-specific insights and recognizes listening as an active, strategic process. This model has been beneficial for analyzing listening behavior in contexts where direct strategy instruction is lacking.

Beyond individual taxonomies, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) proposed integrating LLSs into a broader self-regulation framework, arguing that strategies should not be viewed in isolation but as part of learners' regulatory capacity—including motivation control, attention control, and emotion regulation. This aligns with the increasing shift in SLA research from discrete strategies to strategic self-regulation, especially relevant when working with non-English majors who lack consistent motivation or external rewards for English mastery.

Furthermore, Rubin (1975), one of the earliest strategy scholars, argued that successful learners actively manage their own learning and create opportunities for practice beyond classroom requirements. This perspective reinforces the importance of studying students in non-language disciplines—such as physical education—who may not receive adequate in-class English exposure.

In summary, LLSs are multidimensional, shaped by learners' gender (Ho & Ng, 2016; Wahyuni, 2022), disciplinary background (Osanai, 2000), and motivation (Chang & Liu, 2015). Importantly, the way students understand and apply strategies is shaped by broader sociocultural and educational norms, and research must adapt theoretical models to local contexts.

In Vietnamese universities—particularly those focused on applied or technical fields like physical education—learners may lack exposure to the reflective, self-regulatory practices assumed by Western LLSs frameworks. For this reason, LLSs research in such settings should take a critical-contextual approach, examining not only which strategies are used, but how learners interpret them within the constraints of their learning environment.

2.2. Applications and Effectiveness of SILL

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), developed by Oxford (1990), has been one of the most frequently used instruments for assessing LLSs use globally. Its structured format and broad taxonomy have made it popular among researchers across cultures and disciplines.

Numerous studies have linked effective use of SILL strategies, particularly metacognitive and cognitive ones, to improved academic performance (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Jantawong et al., 2018). These findings support Dörnyei's (2005) concept of strategic competence, which emphasizes not just the quantity but the appropriateness of strategy use.

More specifically, in Southeast Asia, research has shown strong correlations between SILL scores and English achievement. Jantawong et al. (2018) found that Thai undergraduates with frequent use of metacognitive strategies had significantly better academic outcomes. This reinforces Vandergrift's (2005) work, which showed that planning and monitoring learning were crucial to receptive skill development, especially in listening and reading.

Research has also explored affective and social strategies. Oxford and Crookall (1989) found that instruction in affective strategies such as relaxation and positive self-talk reduced anxiety and improved performance. Similarly, Balkaya (2023) showed that social strategy use led to higher confidence and speaking scores in EFL learners, underscoring the potential value of interactional practice in developing communication skills.

However, methodological critiques of SILL persist. Dörnyei (2005) and Veenman

(2011) questioned its reliance on Likert-scale self-reporting, arguing that it may not accurately capture learner behavior. Woodrow (2005) further cautioned that cultural and educational values—such as collectivism or deference to authority—can shape responses and skew results in non-Western settings. These concerns are especially relevant in Vietnamese universities, where classroom learning is often passive, test-oriented, and not conducive to the development of autonomous strategies.

Despite these limitations, SILL remains a useful diagnostic tool when used with contextual awareness. Table 1 below highlights selected international and local applications of SILL.

Table 1. Application of SILL worldwide and in Vietnam

Author(s)	Country	Participants	Key Findings
Magogwe and Oliver (2007)	Botswana	Secondary and tertiary students	Strategic use varied by proficiency; more advanced learners used strategies better.
Jantawong et al. (2018)	Thailand	University learners	Academic achievement is related to metacognitive and cognitive strategy use.
Tran (2022)	Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City)	University students	Metacognitive strategies are most frequently used, followed by memory, affective, cognitive compensation, and social strategies, which are the least preferred ones.

While these studies confirm the usefulness of SILL in diagnosing patterns of strategy use, they also reveal its limitations. Most SILL studies focus on general or English-major populations. As a result, learners in discipline-specific contexts such as physical education remain under-researched. These students may have unique learning experiences, expectations, and motivations that influence their engagement with language learning strategies. There are some empirical works in Vietnam that offer insight perspective for the research of non-English majors using SILL (Oxford, 1990). For example, in 2023, Vo et al. carried out a survey on 725 undergraduate students at Nong Lam University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research results showed that the students at this university just used SILL at a medium level; the most frequently used strategies were metacognitive, followed by memory and affective, while social strategies were the least frequently used. In addition, Phan et al. (2023) by using SILL questionnaire collected data from 296 English-majored students and 1450 non-English-majored students. The researchers then analysed the data and concluded that the students who learnt English as the main field used learning strategies more frequently than the ones who studied other majors. The three main points that these two studies underline are : (1) non-English major students in Vietnam do not use wide range of language learning strategies and tend to underutilize the social strategies; (2) the strategy using of the major vs. non-major groups is measurably different- that is non-English majors less used SILL language learning strategies than did English majors; and the SILL is still a reliable instrument in the Vietnamese context.

At UPES, English is taught as a compulsory subject; however, students often prioritize physical training and professional skills over language learning. English is frequently perceived as secondary, and students may receive little encouragement to engage in strategic learning. As Hung (2020) observed, many rely heavily on translation strategies—reflecting both limited language confidence and a pragmatic, exam-oriented learning approach.

Given these realities, relying solely on a quantitative instrument like SILL may not fully

capture the nuanced and context-sensitive nature of strategic language learning behaviors. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) emphasized, strategy use is dynamic, socially situated, and influenced by contextual and cultural factors. To address this complexity, the present study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, beginning with the administration of Oxford's (1990) SILL questionnaire to identify general patterns of strategy use, followed by in-depth qualitative interviews with selected participants. This combined approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of how students at UPES perceive, adopt, or resist language learning strategies, thereby enriching existing models and contributing to more inclusive and contextually grounded language pedagogy.

2.3. Research context

This study was conducted with first-year students at UPES. The university specializes in training physical education teachers at the undergraduate level for high schools, colleges, and universities. It also serves as a center for scientific research aimed at standardizing physical education teachers in accordance with the Ministry of Education and Training's requirements.

In terms of foreign language instruction, the university's undergraduate program includes two English courses—English 1 and English 2—comprising a total of 75 periods. Each period lasts 50 minutes, and students typically attend four periods per session, as determined by the university's schedule. English 1 carries three credits and consists of 45 periods, while English 2 carries two credits with 30 periods. The official textbook used for both courses is English for Sports, developed by the university's English permanent lecturers' staff. The curriculum aims to develop students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, starting at the A2 level (according to the CEFR), to achieve B1 upon course completion, thereby meeting the university's foreign language graduation requirements.

However, due to the university's training model and limited facilities, the final exams can assess only reading, writing, and grammar. Listening and speaking skills are primarily practiced and evaluated during in-class activities.

Students at UPES are all non-English majors specializing in physical education and sports. They typically excel in physical and practical activities but often find theoretical subjects challenging. Many individuals struggle to maintain prolonged concentration in classroom-based lectures and express a preference for active, movement-oriented learning environments. These characteristics distinguish them from students at other universities and influence how they approach English learning, including the strategies they adopt. For English, some students study only to fulfil course requirements. A small survey conducted by the lecturers at the beginning of Module English 1 revealed that many students felt anxious about learning English, citing a loss of foundational knowledge, a lack of motivation, and limited time for practice. The students also claimed that these commitments are due to their involvement in professional sports training and part-time jobs, which are necessary to cover living expenses in addition to their academic responsibilities.

3. Data and research methods

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), where the researchers initially collected and analyzed quantitative data and subsequently conducted qualitative interviews to explain further and interpret the survey findings. Lund (2012) conducted a literature review that listed the benefits of using mixed methods in research. First, mixed methods help answer complex questions more effectively than using either qualitative or quantitative methods alone. Second, results from both methods can focus on different aspects but still support each other, providing a more comprehensive

understanding of the topic. Third, when both types of results lead to the same conclusions, it makes the findings more reliable. Lastly, suppose the results from the two methods disagree. In that case, this can encourage deeper thinking, innovative ideas, and further research—leading to new theories if the data is properly collected and analyzed.

The research involved 342 second-year students of the ĐH18 cohort, including 95 female students. All of them were in the physical education major, the sole academic program offered at the university. To gather quantitative data, the researcher—who also serves as the instructor of English 2—translated Oxford’s (1990) SILL from English into Vietnamese and administered it as a Google Form survey to all students. The SILL has been validated in various cultural and educational contexts, showing consistent reliability (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). To support the validity of the survey in the present study, the other three TESOL colleagues were sent the Google form with the theoretical basis of SILL in Vietnamese and asked to provide feedback to ensure content and construct validity. These 3 TESOL colleagues then sent their feedback to the researchers to perfect the form. Additionally, a pilot test with a small group of 10 students – specifically, those in the volunteer student union of the university - was conducted to check the clarity and appropriateness of the items, confirming face validity through student feedback. Following the procedures outlined above, the Vietnamese version of the SILL questionnaire was finalized. The researcher then distributed the questionnaire via a Google Form link to 350 students enrolled in the ĐH18 cohort and requested their participation. The data collection period spanned one week, during which 342 out of 350 students responded. These responses were treated as the study's quantitative data set and were subsequently analyzed using simple Excel software. For qualitative data collection, the researcher purposefully selected 20 students from a total of 342 surveyed individuals for in-depth interviews. The interview sample consisted of 11 males and 9 females, which closely reflects the overall gender ratio of the student body in the university where the number of male students is larger than the number of female students because the university specializes in physical education. Their English proficiency ranges from A1 to B1 according to the CEFR framework, which is in line with the general level of non-English major students. In addition, a special thing is that the main training field at UPES is physical education, so all the students participating in the interview were students of this field, and they also chose to study different specialized sports such as football, athletics and gymnastics. This diversity allowed the study to have a more comprehensive and balanced view of how groups of students with different backgrounds and learning experiences use foreign language learning strategies. These participants were either residing in the university dormitory or were available and willing to meet on campus outside of official class hours for a face-to-face interview lasting 30 to 45 minutes. As the participants’ English instructor, the researcher acknowledged potential power dynamics. To mitigate this, interviews were conducted post-course completion, and students were assured of anonymity. The purpose of the interviews was to gain deeper insights into students’ use of language learning strategies as indicated in their survey responses. During the interviews, students’ identities were anonymized through the use of coded names, their responses were recorded, and all sessions were audio-recorded with their prior consent.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Quantitative results

The data from the survey of 342 students were analyzed using simple Excel software. The group means scores were illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. SILL Strategy Group Means

No.	Strategy groups	Mean Score
1	Metacognitive	3.23
2	Memory	3.20
3	Social	3.15
4	Cognitive	3.01
5	Affective	2.93
6	Compensation	2.89

The descriptive statistics revealed notable differences in the frequency of use across the six strategy categories. Metacognitive strategies had the highest mean score ($M = 3.23$), indicating that students frequently engaged in activities such as setting goals, planning, monitoring progress, and evaluating their learning outcomes. This suggests a relatively strong tendency toward self-regulation in their English learning.

Memory strategies ranked second ($M = 3.19$), indicating a substantial reliance on techniques for retaining and retrieving language items, such as vocabulary, grammar rules, and sentence structures. This finding highlights the importance of memorization in students' approach to English learning, particularly in contexts where examinations place a strong emphasis on accuracy and recall.

Social strategies were the third most frequently used category ($M = 3.15$). Many students reported learning through interaction with peers or others, though such engagement often occurred in informal or incidental situations rather than structured communicative practice.

Cognitive strategies were employed with a mean score of 3.01, indicating a moderate use of direct learning techniques, such as note-taking, summarizing, translation, and practice through reading, listening, or media exposure.

The lowest mean scores were recorded for affective strategies ($M = 2.93$) and compensation strategies ($M = 2.89$). The relatively low affective score indicates infrequent use of methods to manage motivation, anxiety, or other emotional factors in language learning. Similarly, the low compensation score suggests limited use of strategies such as inferring meaning from context, using synonyms, or paraphrasing to overcome knowledge gaps.

Overall, the quantitative results indicate that UPES students most frequently employ strategies that facilitate self-regulation (metacognitive), memorization, and, to a lesser extent, social interaction. In contrast, strategies aimed at emotional regulation, compensating for knowledge gaps, or developing flexible communicative skills are used less often. These patterns provide a broad overview of students' strategic preferences, which are further illuminated by the qualitative findings.

4.2. Qualitative results

To further investigate these patterns and address the second research question, a series of face-to-face interviews was conducted to explore UPES students' perceptions of their English language learning strategies as measured by the SILL.

Regarding metacognitive strategies ($M = 3.23$), the interviews revealed that motivated students—often aiming for CEFR B1 proficiency or pursuing specific career goals—actively

engaged in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning. This group displayed strong self-regulation and clear goal-setting behaviours, which helps explain the comparatively high quantitative score. They consistently reported that the use of metacognitive strategies sustained their motivation, particularly when linked to long-term career aspirations.

Several students provided illustrative examples of this link between strategy use and personal goals. One student emphasized the importance of developing strong English communication skills, noting that proficiency would offer a competitive advantage during future international tournaments, both in terms of performance and interaction. Beyond athletic pursuits, another student, C (DH18A), expressed his ambition to improve his English proficiency to support his family's ecotourism business in Ben Tre, recognizing the language's value in engaging with international visitors. Similarly, student N (DH18D) shared a personal experience in which he assisted a foreigner who had an accident in his locality; despite his limited English, he was able to help, an event that left him feeling fulfilled and more motivated to improve his English skills daily. Such narratives illustrate Dörnyei's (2009) concept of the ideal L2 self, in which learners envision themselves as proficient English users, thereby sustaining their motivation over time. They also reflect Vandergrift's (2007) emphasis on attentional control as a critical factor in listening development.

All participants ($M = 3.19$) reported frequently using memory strategies, particularly for retaining vocabulary, grammar rules, and sentence structures. This preference can be attributed to the exam-oriented nature of English assessment at the university, which primarily evaluates reading and writing skills (Thanh, 2020; Phuong, 2025; Xie, 2025). In such high-stakes testing contexts, teaching and learning are often aligned with the specific skills and formats being assessed, thereby encouraging the adoption of surface-level strategies such as memorization (Xie, 2025).

For instance, T (DH18A) described his self-study approach:

"I only learn English when I have the English class the next day. When the exam comes, I spend more time on this subject and try to memorize what the lecturer emphasized in class, hoping to pass the exam. I think I just learn English for tests and exams."

Due to large class sizes (Roshan et al., 2022), teacher-centered teaching (University of Texas, Center for Teaching & Learning, n.d.), and a mismatch between curriculum goals and assessments (Salmanova, 2025) students had few chances for communicative practice, which led them to depend more on memorization as their main learning strategy. Student A (DH18A), a member of the Ho Chi Minh City Taekwondo team, noted that intensive training and competition left little time for English study:

"Memorization is one of the best ways for me to get good results in the final exam. One more thing, until now I don't think I really have a real chance to practice my English in real life, so I just learn it because this is a compulsory subject."

A smaller proportion of participants reported using cognitive strategies ($M = 3.01$), such as media exposure and self-correction. D (DH18D) described his incidental learning through watching movies and listening to music:

"These activities not only help me relax but also improve my English, especially my listening and speaking skills, and enrich my English vocabulary."

Similarly, H (DH18A) highlighted the value of error correction and reflection—key cognitive strategies that also enhance metacognitive awareness:

"I can learn from my errors. Whenever I know that there are errors in my English usage,

I can correct them and avoid making the same mistakes in the future.”

In contrast, the use of affective strategies was limited. For example, the strategy of “writing down feelings in a language learning diary” was rarely employed, as students reported not having the habit of keeping a diary. Student D (DH18A) described diary writing as “a meaningless thing to do,” while T (DH18B) explained:

“Instead of writing down my feelings, I spend time looking for solutions.”

Overall, the interview findings revealed a clear preference for strategies that directly supported exam performance and long-term professional goals, while strategies aimed at emotional regulation or reflective practice received less attention. This pattern is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by the distinct learner profile at UPES. As physically active students who excel in movement-based contexts but often find theoretical subjects challenging, they may be less inclined toward prolonged reflective or sedentary learning activities. This orientation, combined with an exam-focused curriculum and limited opportunities for authentic communication, appears to strongly influence how they select, adapt, and prioritize English learning strategies.

4.3. Discussion

The quantitative results of the study showed that metacognitive strategies and memory strategies were most commonly used, followed by social and cognitive strategies, while affective and compensation strategies were less common among students at UPES in learning English. The qualitative results further clarified these trends, showing that students' choices in using strategies were shaped by the exam-oriented curriculum, limited opportunities to practice English communication, and the specific impact of the physical education training program implemented in the university such as the limited teaching time for English subject, namely 5 credits in the entire training program.

These study results were also similar to the ones with non-English major students at universities in Vietnam conducted by Phan et al. (2023). Additionally, a study carried out by Nguyen (2016) also came to a similar conclusion that students studying at Vietnamese universities—especially non-major students—rely heavily on metacognitive and memory strategies while making little use of compensation and affective strategies. These findings revealed a consistent structure in which Vietnamese learners emphasize goal setting, monitoring, and memorization rather than social or affective strategies.

However, the results obtained at UPES show a unique nuance within the general trend noted in previous studies. Although the social strategy group was used slightly more frequently than the results of most previous works, the affective and compensation strategies were still the least used groups. This difference may reflect the nature of physical education training, where students are familiar with group work and interactions with teammates during their practice, which can easily be extended to foreign language learning through communication. In addition, the limited use of emotion regulation and knowledge compensation strategies suggests that students' emotional self-control and flexible communication skills are not yet well developed. The reasons may stem from an exam-oriented approach to learning, limited time spent on English subject due to the structure of the training program, and a lack of opportunities to use English in real-life communication situations at the university.

Furthermore, compared to the study by Son and Habók (2023), who noted that Vietnamese non-English major students had good metacognitive awareness but limited metacognitive skills, UPES students in this study also showed a similar trend: they could plan and evaluate their learning, but did not maintain the ability to monitor and adjust these

strategies regularly. Overall, these findings suggest that Vietnamese university students, especially non-English majors, still tend to rely on surface strategies to achieve immediate learning outcomes, rather than engaging in deeper cognitive processes or emotional regulation in learning. The current study extends this evidence by clarifying how these tendencies are manifested in the context of sports education, where language learning is strongly influenced by the practice-oriented and organizational nature of the discipline – an area that has not received much attention in previous studies of language learning strategies.

These results suggest that non-native English learners need to be guided to use learning strategies explicitly and systematically in learning the language. According to Cohen (2014), effective strategy-based teaching is about helping learners to recognize, practice, and self-evaluate different strategies in the learning process. For UPES students, lecturers can design in-class activities such as requiring and guiding students to make weekly study plans, self-assess after in-class tests, or practice emotional control techniques such as self-motivation or relaxation before practising English speaking skill. Additionally, compensation strategies—such as paraphrasing when the students forget a word or guessing the meaning from context—can also be used through conversational games, role-playing, or simulations, helping students respond flexibly and speak English more naturally.

5. Conclusion and policy implications

This study provides valuable insights into how UPES students approach learning English. The findings show that students tend to rely much on metacognitive and memory strategies, while cognitive and affective strategies are used much less often. Their approach to learning English appears to be influenced by several crucial factors, including their focus on physical education, limited time for studying, low confidence in their language skills, and the belief that English is not directly relevant to their current studies or future careers. However, some students stood out for their strong motivation and clear use of strategies—especially when they had a vision of English as helpful for real-life communication or future job opportunities.

This study demonstrates that learners in non-language-focused disciplines- in this research, UPES students usually possess unique motivational patterns and strategy preferences that challenge the generalizability of mainstream LLS frameworks. By integrating Oxford's SILL framework with qualitative methods, notably semi-structured interviews, the research provides rich, in-depth perspectives on learners' motivations, attitudes, and actual strategy use. These findings contribute meaningfully to the broader understanding of language learning strategies in other discipline-specific contexts.

The findings highlight the need for more targeted pedagogical approaches that reflect the unique contexts and learning profiles of non-English majors, especially those in the physical education and sports context. Educators at these educational institutes are encouraged to adopt learner-centered, purposeful teaching strategies that promote the effective use of learning strategies, strengthen learner confidence, and align English language instruction with students' real-world needs. Integrating experiential learning, communicative activities, and reflective practices into classroom instruction can help foster learner autonomy and long-term strategic competence. Emphasis should also be placed on raising awareness of underutilized strategies, particularly cognitive and affective techniques, to help learners better manage emotional challenges and deepen their engagement with language input and output.

From an academic perspective, this study highlights the importance of tailoring English teaching to fit students' fields of study. For physical education majors and students in other applied disciplines, English should not just be taught as a general subject—it should be shown

as a helpful tool they can apply in both their careers and everyday lives. Universities could make English more meaningful by designing courses that connect language learning with students' professional interests. For instance, using sports-related topics or real-life situations in class might help students feel more motivated and engaged. It is also essential that teacher training programs include practical modules on strategy-based instruction, so lecturers can better support students in finding and using learning strategies that really work for them.

From a research perspective, this study demonstrates a genuine need to investigate how LLSs function in specific academic and cultural contexts. Since students' majors and learning environments can influence how they employ strategies, future studies should consider these factors in their design. Using a mixed-methods approach with a larger and more diverse group of participants—or comparing students from different schools and disciplines—could provide a more profound and more comprehensive picture. In addition, because self-reported data and small sample sizes have their limitations, combining interviews or surveys with classroom observations or learner journals .

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