

Original Research Article

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study mainly intends to identify the relationship between English language difficulties and language learning strategies of foreign students. It utilized descriptive-correlational research design. The study was conducted in a higher education institution located in District 1 of **Davao City, Southern Philippines**. This study included seventeen (17) foreign students of a higher education institution in Davao City, Philippines using criterion sampling. The data was collected using an adapted **survey questionnaire** which has been tested for validity and checked for reliability using Cronbach Alpha. To analyze the data, **Mean and Pearson's r** were used. Results revealed that there is a significant relationship between English language difficulties and language learning strategies of foreign students. Additionally, it has been indicated that there is a moderate level of both study variables. This study contributed significant insights to the academic institutions, school administrators, teachers, foreign students, and future researchers.

Keywords: *language, English language difficulties, language learning strategies, foreign students, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Although English is the world's lingua franca, English language difficulties are still widely experienced by both ESL and EFL learners. For instance, in Jordan, it is evident that learners have problems with spoken and written expressions using the language, which compromises their social and professional lives (Khasawneh, 2021). Furthermore, In Baghdad, English language students face difficulties in learning the language mainly because of society's role in discouraging English language learning, the learners' shyness, lack of motivation, and the crowded class size (Alsalihi, 2020).

In the national context, several Filipino learners, despite having English as the second language, still struggle with learning the language. The findings of the study of Tomas, Villaros, and Galman (2021) showed that most learners were at the

frustration reading level. The observed causes of this result were lack of mastery of the reading elements, presence of students-at-risk, and lack of reading habits. The findings of the study of Pabro-Maquidato (2021) also revealed that students experience physiological symptoms, emotional tensions, and mental difficulties whenever they are speaking the language. This speaking anxiety is mainly caused by their fear of losing face or fear of negative feedback. In addition, the study of Naparan and Bacasmot (2024) reported that students in the Davao Region also experience English language difficulties but only at a moderate level.

In an attempt to reduce difficulties in learning the language, students often have their set of language learning strategies to cope with the problem. As mentioned in the study of Anggarista and Wahyudin (2022), Indonesian graduates are expected to have excellent academic and communication skills to be at par with the international standards. However, this does not guarantee that the students will be proficient right away in the English language since they have difficulties learning it. To address this issue, as proposed by the same author, the use of strategies in learning the language should be discussed.

The **Metacognitive Theory** proposes the hypothesized relationship between the two variables of this study. This theory argues that, aside from developing the cognition of the language learners as they move through stages, they should also use their metacognition to cope with difficult topics, particularly in more advanced stages. This theory promotes the utilization of several learning strategies to address difficulties and to easily absorb learning. Language learners, in particular, should have a high level of awareness of the complexities of the language they want to learn, the challenges one might encounter in the process, and the language learning strategies that can be used to address such challenges (Haukas, BJORKE, & DYPEDAHL, 2018).

Numerous attempts have been made to **classify** these language learning strategies. One is Rubin's categorization wherein she identified two learning strategies groups: **direct and indirect strategies**. Using Rubin's categorization, **Oxford** (1990) grouped the strategies into **six** categories. They are as follows: cognitive strategies, memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, compensation strategies, and social strategies. She labeled this categorization as Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Haukas, BJORKE, & DYPEDAHL, 2018).

The mentioned theory also served as the fundamental basis for the conceptual figure of the study as presented below.

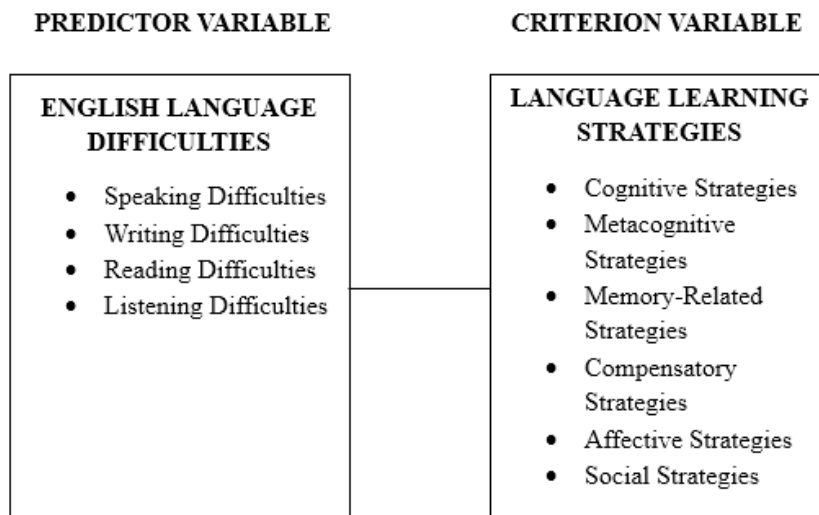


Figure 1. The conceptual figure of the study

Figure 1 shows the conceptual figure of the study which explains the relationship between English language difficulties and language learning strategies. The predictor variable of this study is English language difficulties. It is narrowed down to four indicators: speaking, writing, reading, and listening difficulties. English language difficulties refer to the challenges that are experienced by learners in

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speaking, listening, writing, and reading using English as a second or foreign language.

The study's criterion variable is language learning strategies, which are viewed through six categories from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL): cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social strategies. Cognitive strategies pertain to a mechanism that learners employ to help them process and use the language, such as writing notes in the English language. Memory strategies relate to methods employed by learners to retrieve information. Compensation strategies refer to the method to help learners cope with their lack of knowledge while metacognitive strategies are the strategies used to facilitate the entire process of learning. Affective strategies relate to ways of determining a person's level of emotion and anxiety and ways of dealing with them. Lastly, social strategies are defined as ways to help learners collaborate with other people and understand the target language and culture (Zou, 2022).

Evidently, learners have difficulties in several language aspects. In the Philippines, English Proficiency Index (EPI) reported that the country's language proficiency has declined in the years 2019 and 2020, making the country seven spots lower in the international ranking (Valderama; Rubio). Additionally, the study of Sun and Wang (2020) revealed that students do not frequently use self-regulated learning strategies. This decline of English proficiency and infrequent use of language learning strategies supports the urgency of conducting this research.

Although a number of studies have already been carried out about the English language difficulties of EFL and ESL learners, there is a limited available literature exploring the relationship between foreign students' English language difficulties and

their use of language learning strategies. Moreover, little to no research has been conducted about the mentioned topic in the local scope.

Thus, this study intends to assess the relationship between the foreign students' English language difficulties and language learning strategies. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the **level of English** language difficulties of foreign students in terms of:
 - 1.1. Speaking;
 - 1.2. Reading;
 - 1.3. Writing; and
 - 1.4. Listening?
2. What is the level of usage of **language learning strategies** of foreign students in terms of?
 - 2.1. Cognitive Strategies;
 - 2.2. Metacognitive Strategies;
 - 2.3. Memory-Related Strategies;
 - 2.4. Compensatory Strategies;
 - 2.5. Affective Strategies; and
 - 2.6. Social Strategies?
3. Is there a significant relationship between English language difficulties and language learning strategies of foreign students?

This study also seeks to prove or disprove the study's null hypothesis- there is no significant relationship between English language difficulties and language learning strategies of the foreign students.

This study will contribute to the **global community by adding to the existing body of knowledge**. By determining the specific challenges faced by foreign learners and the strategies they used to address them, the foremost step in solving the problem will have been taken. The results of this study may provide the groundwork for formulating solutions for problems in language difficulty- problems which are commonly experienced by the majority of the population of ESL and EFL learners.

The **academic institutions and school administrators** may derive further advantages from the study's findings. The result of the study may give significant information about the language learning difficulties of the foreign students and their learning strategies, specifically, which difficulties and strategies are usually and rarely encountered by them. Thus, it helps the university and colleges in addressing the needs of the foreign learners and in supporting their way to overcome their problems with regards to language learning. **Teachers** can also benefit from this study as it may serve as their guide in deciding how to effectively address the difficulties of foreign students.

Furthermore, the main beneficiaries of this study are the **foreign students**. They will be informed about the relationship between their English language difficulties and their language learning strategies; hence, they can adjust their use of the strategies to address their difficulties. Lastly, the information provided in this study may be used by future **researchers** to supplement their future studies

METHODS

Research Respondents

The study participants were seventeen (17) foreign students of a higher education institution (HEI) in Davao City, Philippines. For privacy and confidentiality, the specific name of the research setting was not disclosed in this paper. This HEI is a non-sectarian academic institution located in District 1 of Davao City, Southern Philippines. It is a renowned university in the country known for its untarnished reputation of delivering quality education. Remarkably, it is one of the two universities in Davao Region to have been granted the Autonomous Status by the Commission on Higher Education.

To identify the research respondents, criterion sampling was used. This means that the study's samples were determined based on a predetermined criteria (Ames,

Glenton, & Lewin, 2019). The inclusion criteria encompassed all foreign undergraduate students enrolled in any of the courses offered by the research setting, with English as their second or foreign language. Participants were actively engaged in their courses during the study period, attending classes and completing coursework. Furthermore, students from all countries and nationalities were welcome. Whether temporary residents, such as international exchange students, or long-term residents with student visas, all foreign students were eligible.

Excluded from the study were individuals who did not meet the definition of foreign students and those who do not speak or understand the English language. Additionally, participants who were not enrolled in any courses offered by the research setting were also excluded.. Lastly, the study did not cover foreign students who have dropped or totally withdrawn and/or who transferred to schools other than the study's setting.

Participants had the autonomy to voluntarily withdraw from any or all aspects of the research study they had previously agreed to participate in. Before withdrawing, participants were required to inform the researcher, although providing reasons for discontinuation was optional. There were no negative consequences for refusal or withdrawal, and participants did not incur any penalties or lose any benefits. Data collected from withdrawing participants were completely discarded and were not included in the study's results.

Research Instrument

The research instrument used in this paper consisted of three parts. Part 1 questionnaire dealt with the Demographic Data that focused on the age, gender and the preferences of the Foreign Students. Part 2 focused on the English Language Difficulties of the Foreign Students. Part 3 focuses on the Language Learning

Strategies of the Foreign Students. These questionnaires are patterned, adapted, and modified from the research conducted by Ratana Pawapatcharandom on her *Investigation of Thai Students' English Language Problems and Their Learning Strategies in the International Program at Mahidol University*.

The adapted questionnaire was reviewed by the research adviser for comments and suggestions. Following the approval, the instrument underwent validation by three expert validators. The result of the validation generated a mean score of 4.3 which is described as very good. Afterwards, the instrument was tested for reliability by the statistician using Cronbach Alpha yielding the result of 0.843 which means that the instrument is reliable.

To interpret the responses of foreign students in English language difficulties and language learning strategies questionnaire, the following rating scale was used:

English Language Difficulties

The interpretation of the data in terms of the English Language Difficulties was based on the following:

Descriptions	Interpretations	Range of Means
Low	Never have problems	1.0 to 1.4
	Rarely have problems	1.5 to 2.4
Moderate	Occasionally have problems	2.5 to 3.4
High	Usually have problems	3.5 to 4.4
	Always have problems	4.5 to 5.0

Language Learning Strategies

The interpretation of the data in terms of the language learning strategies was based on the following:

High	Always or almost always use	4.5 to 5.0
	Usually use	3.5 to 4.4
Moderate	Sometimes use	2.5 to 3.4
Low	Generally not use	1.5 to 2.4
	Never or almost never use	1.0 to 1.4

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Design and Procedure

This study employed the descriptive-correlational research design. Descriptive-correlational design uses descriptive and correlational statistics to describe the level of the variables and to quantify the level of association or relationship between and among them (Naparan & Bacasmot, 2024). In this study, the method provided an objective and unbiased measurement of English language difficulties and language learning strategies of the participants. It also accentuated statistical or numerical analysis of the relationship between the two mentioned variables.

The succeeding steps were followed in gathering data from the study participants. First, the researchers secured approval to conduct the study from the HEI's Office of the Dean. Then, a formal request for the list of foreign students was sent to the Office of the Registrar. Afterwards, the researchers forwarded a letter of permission with the attached endorsement letter from the office of the Dean and the survey questionnaire to the participants. The researchers, then, collected the survey questionnaire after all respondents had completed answering the questions. Finally,

the researchers tallied all the data collected from the participants with guidance from the statistician and analyzed the result based on the study's statement of the problem.

In analyzing the data, mean and Pearson's R were used. The mean was used to determine the level of English language difficulties and the level of language learning strategies of the foreign students. Meanwhile, Pearson's R was used to measure the correlation between the two variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of English Language Difficulties

The first objective of this paper was to determine the level of English language difficulties of the foreign students. This was analyzed in terms of the four macro skills, namely, speaking skills, writing skills, listening skills, and reading skills. The level of each of these indicators was measured using Mean.

Table 1
English Language Difficulties of Foreign Students

Indicators	Mean	Descriptive Equivalence
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Speaking Difficulties	2.72	Moderate
Reading Difficulties	2.34	Low
Listening Difficulties	2.73	Moderate
Writing Difficulties	2.69	Moderate
Overall	2.62	Moderate

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Shown in Table 1 is the result on the level of English language difficulties of the respondents as measured through its four indicators. Overall, the respondents show moderate English language difficulties. Specifically, they have moderate levels of difficulty in speaking, listening, and writing, suggesting that, although they somehow experience language difficulties, they have a functional level of communication in these areas. Their difficulty in reading skills, on the other hand, are comparatively lower, which means that they have better grasp at reading than the three other macro-skills. Based on the gathered data, the respondents specifically have difficulties in performing academic presentations in English, writing academic papers, assignments, and reports, articulating or pronouncing words in English, understanding English idioms, and using English vocabulary for effective communication.

This is at par with the findings of Naparan and Bacasmot (2024) which revealed that their respondents also have a moderate level of English language difficulties. In their study, the respondents also have moderate levels of speaking, writing, and listening problems and low level of reading problem. However, the findings of the study of Pawapatcharandom (2007) revealed that Thai participants have a high level of language difficulties since they always experience serious problems with their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

Level of Language Learning Strategies

The second objective of this paper was to determine the level language learning strategies that foreign learners used to address their language difficulties. This was analyzed in terms of its six indicators: Cognitive Strategies, Memory – related Strategies, Metacognitive Strategies, Affective Strategies, Compensatory Strategies, and Social Strategies. The level of each of these indicators is measured using Mean.

Table 2
Level of Language Learning Strategies of Foreign Students

Indicators	Mean	Descriptive Equivalence
Cognitive Strategies	3.42	Moderate
Metacognitive Strategies	3.76	High
Memory – Related Strategies	3.26	Moderate
Compensatory Strategies	3.58	High
Affective Strategies	3.45	Moderate
Social Strategies	3.47	Moderate
Overall	3.49	Moderate

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The results in Table 2 indicate that, in general, the foreign learners' usage of learning strategies is moderate. This suggests that they have a moderate application of the various language learning strategies. While the study participants demonstrate a fair level of engagement with most learning strategies, with particularly frequent use of metacognitive and compensatory strategies, there is still room to increase the consistency of their usage across all types of strategies.

Similarly, the study of Anggarista and Wahyudin (2022) revealed that the most frequent strategy used by the respondents are metacognitive strategies. This is also similar to the findings of Lestari and Wahyudin (2020) which highlighted that metacognitive strategies are also the most frequently used strategies, and memory-related strategies are one of the least used strategies. Furthermore, this study is also

related to the findings of Atika (2019), which also revealed that language learning strategies, in general, are moderately used by the respondents. However, unlike the findings of this study where all strategies were used in moderate level, the result of the study of Atika (2019) reported that only cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies were moderately used by the respondents; the remaining three strategies were poorly used by them.

Correlation between English Language Difficulties and Language Learning Strategies of Foreign Students

The primary objective of this paper was to determine the significance of the relationship between English language difficulties and language learning strategies of foreign students. A Pearson Correlation test was conducted to analyze the relationship between the two variables.

Table 3

Significance of the relationship between English Language Difficulties and Language Learning Strategies of Foreign Students

		English Language Difficulties				OVERALL
		Speaking Skills	Listening Skills	Reading Skills	Writing Skills	
Language Learning Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	0.640** 0.006	0.613** 0.009	0.556* 0.021	0.655** 0.004	0.651** 0.005
	Metacognitive Strategies	0.261 0.311	0.295 0.251	0.290 0.258	0.304 0.235	0.304 0.236

Memory-Related Strategies	0.527* 0.030	0.526* 0.030	0.510* 0.037	0.582* 0.014	0.567* 0.018
Compensatory Strategies	0.567* 0.018	0.511* 0.036	0.538* 0.026	0.515* 0.035	0.563* 0.019
Affective Strategies	0.521* 0.032	0.523* 0.031	0.458 0.065	0.629** 0.007	0.564* 0.018
Social Strategies	0.461 0.062	0.441 0.076	0.368 0.146	0.466 0.059	0.460 0.063
OVERALL	0.572* 0.017	0.558* 0.020	0.521* 0.032	0.606** 0.010	0.597* 0.011

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Legend: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The correlation between English language difficulties and language learning strategies, the predictor and criterion variables respectively, were measured using the Pearson correlation test and yielded fifteen out of twenty-four significant bivariate correlations and an overall significant correlation, as shown in Table 3. Thus, English language difficulties are positively and significantly correlated with the language learning strategies of Foreign Students, $r=0.597$, $p=0.011$.

Specifically, the fifteen significant correlations found are as follows. First, difficulties in speaking skill are positively and significantly correlated with the cognitive strategies; $p=0.640$, $r=0.006$, memory-related strategies; $p=0.527$, $r=0.030$, compensatory strategies; $p=0.567$, $r=0.018$, and affective strategies; $p=0.521$, $r=0.032$ of the foreign students. Second, difficulties in listening skill positively and significantly correlated with the cognitive Strategies; $p=0.613$, $r=0.009$, memory-related strategies; $p=0.526$, $r=0.030$, compensatory strategies; $p=0.511$, $r=0.036$, and Affective strategies; $p=0.523$, $r=0.031$ of the foreign students.

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Third, reading skill difficulties are positively and significantly correlated with

cognitive strategies; $p=0.556$, $r=0.021$, memory-related strategies; $p=0.510$, $r=0.037$, and compensatory strategies; $p=0.538$, $r=0.026$ of the respondents. Lastly, writing skills are positively and significantly correlated with cognitive strategies; $p=0.655$, $r=0.004$, memory-related strategies; $p=0.582$, $r=0.014$, compensatory strategies; $p=0.515$, $r=0.035$, and affective strategies; $p=0.629$, $r=0.007$ of the foreign students.

The overall result yielded from this study supported the notion of its theoretical basis. The Metacognitive Theory, coined by John Flavell, proposed that there is a relationship between English language difficulties and language learning strategies which is consistent with the results generated. With a reported significant correlation between the two variables of the study, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

With reference to the aforementioned results, the following conclusions are formulated. First, the overall level of English language difficulties of the participants is moderate, and they have most difficulty in their listening skills. Second, the overall level of language learning strategies of the participants is moderate and they utilize metacognitive strategies more in dealing with their language learning difficulties. Lastly, there is a positive and significant relationship between English language difficulties and language learning strategies of foreign students. Thus, the null hypothesis of the study is rejected.

Recommendation

In light of the preceding conclusions, the researchers therefore recommend the following:

1. The academic institutions, school administration, and teachers can provide enhancement programs and activities that will help their foreign students in addressing their occasional language learning difficulties. For instance, implementing a peer-tutoring program where foreign learners can practice with each other their conversational skills in a relaxed setting can enhance both language proficiency and speaking confidence. Furthermore, they can encourage foreign students to always use appropriate language learning strategies to help themselves overcome the said difficulties. Organizing workshops on effective language learning strategies may further empower these students to navigate academic and social environments more successfully.
2. The foreign students may take advantage of their institution's academic support services, such as language laboratories, to help them address their language needs. They may participate in seminars and workshops focused on English language development and language learning strategies. They may also seek feedback from their instructors on their language competence, which can be helpful in identifying areas for improvement.
3. Further study may be conducted to address other factors not included in the present study that may have an influence in the English language difficulties and the language learning strategies of the foreign students.

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