

Beyond frequency: exploring language learning strategies and their impact on academic performance among ethnic minority EFL students

Le Huu Thang^{1*}, Vu Minh Hue¹, Duong Thi Thu Hien¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: Le Huu Thang

Received 1 Feb 2026; Accepted 20 March 2026; Published 1 Apr 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JAES.6.2.80-84>

Abstract

This study investigates the use of language learning strategies (LLS) and their relationship with academic performance among ethnic minority students majoring in English at a Vietnamese university. Adopting an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 158 students using a questionnaire adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), followed by semi-structured interviews with 12 participants to provide deeper insights into students' learning experiences. The findings indicate that students reported a moderate level of overall strategy use, with metacognitive strategies being the most frequently employed. Significant differences were found across proficiency levels, with higher-performing students demonstrating more frequent and diverse use of strategies. Correlation analysis revealed a positive relationship between strategy use and academic performance, particularly for cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Qualitative findings further highlight the influence of socio-cultural and educational factors, including limited exposure to English, lack of learning resources, and cultural hesitation in communication.

The study contributes to the literature by moving beyond a descriptive focus on strategy frequency and conceptualizing strategy use as a context-dependent practice shaped by socio-cultural conditions. The findings offer important implications for designing more inclusive and context-sensitive English language teaching practices for ethnic minority students in higher education.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, Ethnic minority students, Academic performance, Socio-cultural factors, EFL context

1. Introduction

English proficiency has become an essential requirement for academic success and employability in the context of globalization. In Vietnam, national education policies have consistently emphasized the role of English as a key tool for international integration and knowledge access. Despite these efforts, disparities in English language proficiency remain evident across student populations, particularly among those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Ethnic minority students often enter higher education with unequal access to linguistic and educational resources. Many come from mountainous or remote areas where exposure to English is limited, and instructional quality is inconsistent (World Bank, 2019) ^[10]. In addition, the use of multiple languages—where students rely on their ethnic language alongside Vietnamese—may increase the cognitive demands of learning English as an additional language (Cummins, 2000). These challenges are further shaped by socio-cultural factors, including educational traditions that prioritize memorization and cultural norms that may discourage active classroom participation (Hofstede, 2011) ^[5]. As a result, these students must not only acquire language knowledge but also adapt to unfamiliar academic expectations.

Within this context, language learning strategies (LLS) have been widely recognized as an important factor influencing language acquisition. LLS refer to the conscious actions and techniques that learners employ to enhance the effectiveness of

their learning (Oxford, 1990) ^[7]. Previous research has consistently shown that more successful learners tend to use strategies more frequently and more flexibly than less successful ones (Griffiths, 2013; Cohen, 2018) ^[4, 1], with metacognitive strategies playing a particularly important role in regulating learning processes (Zimmerman, 2002) ^[11]. However, much of the existing literature conceptualizes strategy use primarily as an individual cognitive behavior, often overlooking the socio-cultural and contextual conditions under which such strategies are developed and applied.

In the Vietnamese context, research on language learning strategies has largely focused on describing patterns of strategy use and examining their relationship with language proficiency (Nguyen, 2015; Tran, 2020) ^[6, 9]. While these studies provide useful insights, they remain predominantly quantitative and offer limited explanation of how and why learners use particular strategies. More importantly, studies specifically addressing ethnic minority students in higher education are still scarce, despite growing concerns about educational inequality in this population. This suggests a need for research that not only measures strategy use but also explores the contextual factors shaping learners' strategic behavior.

To address this gap, the present study investigates language learning strategies among ethnic minority students majoring in English at a Vietnamese university. Specifically, the study examines the extent of strategy use, identifies differences across learner characteristics, and analyzes the relationship

between strategy use and academic performance. In addition, by incorporating qualitative data, the study seeks to explore how socio-cultural and educational factors influence students' use of language learning strategies. The study addresses the following research questions:

- What types of language learning strategies are used by ethnic minority students, and to what extent?
- Are there significant differences in strategy use across different groups of students?
- What is the relationship between language learning strategies and academic performance?
- What contextual factors influence students' strategic behavior?

By moving beyond a purely descriptive focus on frequency, this study contributes to the literature by reconceptualizing language learning strategies as context-dependent practices shaped by socio-cultural conditions. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical insights and practical implications for designing more inclusive and context-sensitive English language teaching practices for ethnic minority students in higher education.

2. Literature review

Language learning strategies (LLS) have long been recognized as a key factor influencing second and foreign language acquisition. Early work by Rebecca L. Oxford (1990) [7] conceptualized LLS as conscious, goal-directed actions that facilitate language learning, and proposed a widely used taxonomy including cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensation, affective, and social strategies. This framework has been extensively applied in EFL contexts and has provided a foundation for understanding how learners actively manage their learning processes.

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that effective language learners tend to use a wider range of strategies and apply them more flexibly than less successful learners. Studies have consistently reported that higher-proficiency learners employ more metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning, which are associated with greater autonomy and improved learning outcomes (Zimmerman, 2002; Griffiths, 2013) [11, 4]. Similarly, Andrew D. Cohen (2018) [1] argues that strategic behavior is a distinguishing feature of successful language learners, as it enables them to adapt to different learning tasks and contexts. These findings have led to a general consensus that strategy use is positively related to language achievement.

However, despite the strong empirical support for the effectiveness of LLS, much of the existing research has been criticized for adopting an overly individualistic perspective. In many studies, strategies are treated primarily as cognitive tools that learners can choose and apply independently, with limited attention to the socio-cultural environments in which learning occurs. This perspective has been challenged by scholars such as Xuesong Gao (2010) [3], who argues that language learning strategies should be understood as socially situated practices shaped by learners' histories, identities, and learning contexts. From this viewpoint, strategy use is not merely a matter of individual choice but is influenced by broader structural and cultural conditions.

This socio-cultural perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where learners face unequal educational opportunities. In developing countries, including Vietnam, disparities in access to quality education, learning resources, and language exposure can significantly affect learners' ability to develop and apply effective strategies (World Bank, 2019) [10]. For ethnic minority students, these challenges are often more pronounced. Their learning experiences are shaped by factors such as limited prior exposure to English, differences in educational background, and cultural norms that may influence classroom participation and communication patterns. As a result, the strategic behavior of these learners may differ not only in frequency but also in form and effectiveness.

In the Vietnamese context, research on language learning strategies has largely focused on identifying patterns of strategy use and examining their relationship with language proficiency. For example, studies have reported that Vietnamese university students tend to use metacognitive and cognitive strategies more frequently than affective or social strategies (Nguyen, 2015; Tran, 2020) [6, 9]. While these findings provide useful descriptive insights, they remain limited in two important respects. First, they often rely on quantitative data alone, which may not capture the complexity of learners' experiences. Second, they tend to overlook the contextual factors that shape strategy use, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

More importantly, research specifically targeting ethnic minority students in higher education remains scarce. Existing studies rarely explore how socio-cultural conditions, educational inequality, and learning environments interact to influence learners' strategic behavior. This represents a significant gap in the literature, as understanding these factors is essential for developing more inclusive and effective pedagogical approaches.

In response to these limitations, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate language learning strategies among ethnic minority students in a Vietnamese university context. By integrating quantitative data on strategy use with qualitative insights into learners' experiences, the study seeks to move beyond a purely descriptive focus on frequency and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how and why strategies are used. In doing so, it contributes to the reconceptualization of language learning strategies as context-dependent practices shaped by socio-cultural and educational conditions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to provide deeper insights into the findings. This design allows for a more comprehensive understanding of language learning strategies by combining statistical patterns with contextual explanations.

3.2 Participants

The study involved 158 ethnic minority students majoring in English at a Vietnamese university. The participants were selected using convenience sampling. They represented

different academic years and proficiency levels, allowing for comparisons across groups. All participants had studied English as a foreign language and shared similar educational contexts characterized by limited exposure to English prior to university.

3.3 Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990)^[7]. The questionnaire consisted of items measuring different categories of language learning strategies, including cognitive, metacognitive, memory, affective, and social strategies. Responses were recorded on a Likert scale.

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 12 selected participants. The interviews aimed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors influencing their use of language learning strategies.

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which indicated acceptable internal consistency across all strategy categories ($\alpha > .70$). In addition, the instrument was reviewed by two experts in language education to ensure content validity.

3.4 Data collection

The questionnaire was administered to all participants during regular class time. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured. Following the quantitative phase, 12 students were purposively selected for interviews based on their strategy use patterns and academic performance. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure clarity and depth of responses and were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

3.5 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the overall level of strategy use. Inferential statistics, including independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, were conducted to examine differences across groups. Pearson correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationship between strategy use and academic performance.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes related to students' strategy use and the socio-cultural factors influencing their learning behaviors. The qualitative findings were used to explain and complement the quantitative results.

4. Findings

4.1 Overall use of language learning strategies

The results indicate that ethnic minority students reported a moderate to relatively high level of overall language learning strategy use. Among the six categories, metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used, followed by cognitive strategies, while affective and social strategies were reported at lower levels.

Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for each category of strategies.

Table 1: Overall strategy use

Strategy category	Mean	SD	Level
Memory	3.21	0.58	Medium
Cognitive	3.45	0.62	Medium–High
Compensation	3.30	0.60	Medium
Metacognitive	3.78	0.55	High
Affective	2.95	0.64	Medium
Social	2.88	0.67	Medium
Overall	3.26	0.59	Medium

4.2 Strategy use by category

A closer examination of individual strategy categories shows that metacognitive strategies, such as planning and monitoring learning, were consistently reported at higher levels. In contrast, affective strategies, including anxiety management and self-encouragement, were less frequently used. Social strategies, which involve interaction with others, also showed relatively low usage.

This pattern suggests that students tend to rely more on strategies that support individual learning processes rather than those requiring interaction or emotional regulation.

4.3 Differences across student groups

To examine whether strategy use varied across student characteristics, inferential statistical analyses were conducted. The results revealed significant differences in strategy use across proficiency levels, with higher-achieving students reporting more frequent use of strategies.

However, no statistically significant differences were found across gender and academic year groups.

Table 2 summarizes the results of the ANOVA and t-test analyses.

Table 2: Differences in Strategy Use by Proficiency Level (ANOVA)

Strategy category	Low mean	High mean	F	p-value
Memory	3.05	3.38	4.21	.042
Cognitive	3.22	3.68	6.35	.013
Metacognitive	3.50	4.02	8.11	.005
Affective	2.80	3.10	2.95	.088
Social	2.70	3.05	3.12	.079

$p < .05$ = significant

4.4 Relationship between strategy use and academic performance

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between language learning strategies and academic performance. The results indicate a positive correlation between overall strategy use and students' academic achievement.

Among the different categories, metacognitive and cognitive strategies showed stronger correlations with academic performance compared to other strategy types.

Table 3 presents the correlation coefficients.

Table 3: Correlation between strategy use and academic performance

Strategy category	r	p-value
Memory	.21	.031
Cognitive	.35	.002
Metacognitive	.42	.000
Affective	.18	.067
Social	.16	.081
Overall	.38	.001

4.5 Qualitative findings

The qualitative data provide further insights into students' use of language learning strategies and the factors influencing their learning behavior. Several recurring themes emerged from the interview data.

First, many students reported limited exposure to English prior to university, which affected their confidence and ability to use certain strategies effectively. Second, students highlighted the lack of learning resources and opportunities for practice, particularly in their home regions. Third, cultural factors, such as hesitation in speaking and fear of making mistakes, were identified as barriers to the use of communicative strategies.

These findings complement the quantitative results by illustrating the contextual constraints that shape students' strategic behavior.

Table 4: Summary of Qualitative Themes

Theme	Description
Limited exposure	Students reported little contact with English before university
Lack of resources	Few learning materials and practice opportunities
Low confidence	Fear of making mistakes in communication
Cultural hesitation	Reluctance to speak in class
Strategy awareness gap	Limited understanding of how to use strategies effectively

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine language learning strategies (LLS) among ethnic minority students and their relationship with academic performance within a Vietnamese higher education context. The findings reveal several important patterns that extend existing research by situating strategy use within a specific socio-cultural environment.

First, as shown in Table 1, students reported a moderate overall level of strategy use, with metacognitive strategies being the most frequently employed. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating the central role of metacognitive strategies in effective language learning (Oxford, 1990; Zimmerman, 2002) [7, 11]. However, in the context of this study, the high use of metacognitive strategies may not necessarily indicate well-developed strategic competence. Given that many students come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, this pattern may reflect an adaptive response to academic demands rather than a result of systematic strategy training. In other words, students may attempt to regulate their learning, but their ability to do so effectively may still be limited.

Second, the results in Table 2 show significant differences in strategy use across proficiency levels, particularly in cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Higher-performing students reported more frequent and diverse use of these strategies, supporting the argument that successful learners are more strategic and flexible in their learning behavior (Griffiths, 2013; Cohen, 2018) [4, 1]. Importantly, this difference should be interpreted within the broader context of educational inequality. Students with stronger prior exposure to English are more likely to develop effective strategies, while those from ethnic minority backgrounds may rely on a narrower range of strategies due to limited resources and learning opportunities.

Third, the correlation analysis presented in Table 3 indicates a positive relationship between strategy use and academic performance, with metacognitive and cognitive strategies showing the strongest associations. This finding reinforces the widely accepted view that language learning strategies contribute to improved learning outcomes. However, the moderate strength of the correlations suggests that strategy use alone cannot fully explain academic performance. Instead, it should be understood as one component within a broader system that includes motivation, prior knowledge, and access to educational resources.

Finally, the qualitative findings summarized in Table 4 provide important contextual insights into students' strategic behavior. Students reported limited exposure to English, lack of learning resources, and low confidence in communication as major challenges. In addition, cultural factors, such as hesitation to speak in class and fear of making mistakes, were found to influence the use of social and communicative strategies. These findings support the view that language learning strategies are not purely individual cognitive choices but are shaped by socio-cultural and educational contexts (Gao, 2010; Hofstede, 2011) [3, 5].

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that language learning strategies among ethnic minority students should be understood as context-dependent practices rather than simply individual preferences. While students demonstrate awareness of certain strategies, their ability to use them effectively is influenced by structural constraints, including educational background and cultural norms. This perspective challenges the traditional view of strategy use as an isolated cognitive variable and highlights the need for more context-sensitive approaches in language learning research and pedagogy. These findings also suggest that unequal access to strategic learning opportunities may reinforce existing educational disparities rather than reduce them.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the use of language learning strategies among ethnic minority students and their relationship with academic performance in a Vietnamese university context. The findings reveal that students reported a moderate level of strategy use, with metacognitive strategies being the most frequently employed. Significant differences were found across proficiency levels, with higher-performing students demonstrating more frequent and diverse strategy use. In addition, a positive relationship between strategy use and

academic performance was identified, particularly for cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Beyond these general patterns, the study highlights the importance of considering the socio-cultural and educational context in understanding students' strategic behavior. The qualitative findings suggest that limited exposure to English, lack of learning resources, and cultural factors such as hesitation in communication play a significant role in shaping how strategies are used. These constraints indicate that strategy use should not be viewed solely as an individual cognitive choice but as a context-dependent practice influenced by broader structural conditions.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by moving beyond a descriptive focus on strategy frequency and offering a more nuanced understanding of language learning strategies among ethnic minority students. It emphasizes the need to integrate both cognitive and contextual perspectives in language learning research and practice.

7. Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for English language teaching and educational policy.

First, teachers should incorporate explicit strategy instruction into their teaching practices. Rather than assuming that students naturally develop effective learning strategies, instructors should guide students in selecting, applying, and evaluating strategies, particularly metacognitive and cognitive strategies that are closely associated with academic performance.

Second, there is a need to create a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment that encourages active participation. Given that many ethnic minority students experience hesitation in communication, teachers should adopt pedagogical approaches that reduce anxiety and promote interaction, such as collaborative tasks and scaffolded speaking activities.

Third, educational institutions should consider providing additional learning resources and support systems for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Access to language learning materials, technology, and extracurricular opportunities can play a crucial role in enhancing students' ability to engage in strategic learning.

Finally, at the policy level, efforts should be made to address educational inequalities that affect ethnic minority students. This includes improving the quality of English instruction in remote areas and designing targeted support programs that take into account the specific needs and contexts of these learners.

References

1. Cohen AD. *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge; 2018.
2. Cummins J. *Language, power and pedagogy: bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters; 2000.
3. Gao X. *Strategic language learning: the roles of agency and context*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters; 2010.

4. Griffiths C. *The strategy factor in successful language learning*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters; 2013.
5. Hofstede G. Dimensionalizing cultures: the Hofstede model in context. *Online Read Psychol Cult*, 2011, 2(1).
6. Nguyen TT. Language learning strategies of Vietnamese students: a review. *J Lang Teach Res*. 2015;6(4):845-52.
7. Oxford RL. *Language learning strategies: what every teacher should know*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle; 1990.
8. Phuc NT. Challenges in English learning among students in mountainous areas of Vietnam. *Asian EFL J*. 2021.
9. Tran LH. Language learning strategies and English proficiency among Vietnamese university students. *VNU J Foreign Stud*. 2020;36(2):45-60.
10. World Bank. *Improving education outcomes for ethnic minority students in Vietnam*. Washington (DC): World Bank; 2019.
11. Zimmerman BJ. Becoming a self-regulated learner: an overview. *Theory Pract*. 2002;41(2):64-70.