

Strategic learning in English: A study of low self-efficacy BA students

Estrategias de aprendizaje en inglés: un estudio sobre la autoeficacia en estudiantes universitarios

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Abstract:

Language learning strategies used by students play an essential role in successfully completing a B.A. This is particularly significant for future English language teachers, for whom a high level of language proficiency is also crucial, considering its impact on language teachers' perception of self-efficacy. As self-efficacy has been found to play a vital role in English language instruction (Bhati & Sethy, 2022), several studies have focused on how students with different levels of self-efficacy apply language learning strategies (e.g. Montaña-Gonzalez & Cancino, 2020; Rodriguez, 2018). However, little research addressing low levels has been conducted. This mixed-methods case study aims to learn about the language learning strategies of students with low English language proficiency in an English B.A. program at a major public university in Mexico. To understand how their low sense of self-efficacy might impact their choice and use of language learning strategies, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 7 students showing a low sense of self-efficacy in a Likert-scale questionnaire administered precisely to select participants for the present study. Using thematic analysis to manage the emerging categories, findings showed that low-proficiency students relied mainly on memorisation drills and asking questions to more knowledgeable peers or teachers. These findings shed light on how EFL students in Mexico with low self-efficacy in English use language learning strategies, offering valuable insights into the actual needs of these students and contributing to broader efforts to improve equity in English education in Mexico.

Keywords:

EFL, language learning strategies, language proficiency, self-efficacy, teacher education

Resumen:

Las estrategias de aprendizaje de lenguas son fundamentales para concluir con éxito una licenciatura. Particularmente, en el caso de futuros docentes de inglés, para quienes un alto nivel de competencia lingüística resulta esencial, el uso adecuado de estas estrategias impacta en su percepción de autoeficacia. Se ha demostrado que la autoeficacia desempeña un papel crucial en la enseñanza del inglés (Bhati & Sethy, 2022), y diversos estudios han analizado cómo los estudiantes con distintos niveles de autoeficacia emplean estrategias de aprendizaje de lenguas (Montaña-González y Cancino, 2020; Rodríguez, 2018). Sin embargo, son pocos los estudios que se han realizado sobre casos de estudiantes con bajos niveles de autoeficacia. El presente estudio de caso con enfoque mixto investigó las estrategias de aprendizaje utilizadas por estudiantes de una licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa en una universidad pública mexicana, quienes mostraban una baja autoeficacia lingüística en inglés. Para explorar cómo esta percepción incide en la selección y aplicación de estrategias, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a siete estudiantes identificados mediante un cuestionario de escala de Likert. El análisis temático de las entrevistas permitió identificar categorías emergentes y los resultados indican que estos estudiantes tienden a depender de estrategias como la memorización y consulta a compañeros o docentes con mayor conocimiento. Estos hallazgos permiten comprender mejor cómo los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera con baja autoeficacia enfrentan el proceso de aprendizaje y aportan información valiosa para diseñar intervenciones que promuevan una enseñanza del inglés más equitativa en México.

Palabras Clave:

Autoeficacia, EILE, estrategias de aprendizaje de lenguas, formación de profesores, nivel de lengua

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Introduction

English as a second language has become essential to Mexican public education, as it has long been seen as an area of opportunity for the educational authorities. This room for improvement has been approached from diverse perspectives, such as infrastructure, teaching approaches, content, students' attitudes and perspectives, etc. However, some areas have not been fully explored, such as how the students' low sense of self-efficacy regarding their language proficiency impacts their choice and application of language learning strategies to improve their linguistic abilities.

Self-efficacy (SE henceforth) can be understood as the individual's beliefs in their capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action necessary to attain designated types of performance (Artino, 2012). In language learning, specifically in this case, English as a foreign language, this SE can be understood as how capable a student feels about performing and completing a task that involves linguistic skills like writing, listening, speaking, and reading.

This sense of SE fluctuates based on students' success in performing specific tasks. The more tasks they complete successfully, the higher the sense will be; conversely, the less successful the tasks are, the lower the sense will be. In Bandura's (1977) words, "after strong efficacy expectations are developed through repeated success, the negative impact of occasional failures is likely to be reduced" (p.195).

Language learning strategies (LLS) are crucial when learning a new language. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined these strategies as learners' intentional attempts to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language, aiming to facilitate the learning process. The most well-known work on LLS is that by Oxford (2001), with her taxonomy of direct (cognitive, memory-related, and compensatory) and indirect (metacognitive, affective, and social) strategies.

The primary objective of this study was to identify students who demonstrated a low sense of self-efficacy (SE) regarding their English language proficiency and to explore the language learning strategies (LLS) they employ in their efforts to improve. By focusing on learners with low SE, this research aims to shed light on a population often underrepresented in LLS studies, which typically focus on high-performing or confident learners. Understanding how these students approach language learning despite their perceived limitations can provide valuable insights into language acquisition's motivational and strategic aspects. Furthermore, examining their strategies could inform targeted pedagogical interventions that support learners with similar profiles. In this way, the study contributes to filling an important gap in the literature by emphasising the voices and

experiences of students who may struggle with confidence but are still actively engaging in the learning process.

Language Learning Strategies research

Different scholars have carried out research in the fields of LLS and SE around the world. First, regarding **language strategies**, Duong (2021) conducted a study in Vietnam to find how frequently high school students implemented language strategies. She used a semi-structured interview to inquire 238 students studying English for seven years. The questions of this instrument were translated into Vietnamese to increase the validity of the answers, and she used descriptive statistics for the data analysis process.

These Vietnamese students showed a preference for metacognitive strategies when learning English. More specifically, the students' top three strategies were paying attention when someone speaks English, discovering how to be a better learner of English, and noticing English mistakes. On the other hand, memory strategies were the least preferred LLS. Even though the students used most of the LLS at a medium level, the frequency at which they used them was moderate. This indicates that the students had not fully exploited LLS to improve their learning process.

Another critical research on this matter was conducted by Giang (2018) in Hanoi, Vietnam. This study focused on the relationship between LLS and the English proficiency levels of freshmen students. The study aimed to uncover the connection between how frequently students employed various LLS and their overall language proficiency, which was gauged by their first-semester Grade Point Average (GPA), which is the indication of a student's academic achievement at school.

The research used a survey and correlational design to gather data through a questionnaire that elicited information on the self-reported frequency of 124 students' LLS usage. Then, the data were analysed using IBM SPSS software.

The findings of Giang's research revealed significant insights. First, male and female students had substantial differences in language learning strategies. Second, the study identified a strong correlation between the results of EFL and tests and the language learning strategies employed across various language skills, with an interesting exception of vocabulary acquisition.

Robledo (2015) implemented an action research project in a private school in Xalapa City. The focus was on determining whether a specific use of learning strategies in the classroom could improve the students' vocabulary. After observing and conducting interviews in the group, this problem with vocabulary was identified using triangulation.

The action plan to attack this problem lasted four weeks. During this time, she presented new vocabulary to the students using a different strategy each week. These strategies were pictorial, mind maps, and the peg method. Once each week ended, she evaluated the strategy. In the fourth week, she presented vocabulary without a strategy, only using flashcards and posters. The results of this experiment were that in the first week, the students improved their writing; in the second, some students, except for some others, remembered some words seen in class; in the third, students used more vocabulary seen in the previous two weeks; and finally, in the fourth week, students showed an improvement in their vocabulary skills.

After conducting this study, Robledo (2015) found that if students are aware of the benefits of learning strategies, they can improve their vocabulary learning. However, the learning factor always depends on elements like motivation and autonomy.

Self-efficacy studies

Regarding the studies on SE in learners of English as a foreign language, Rodríguez (2018) conducted a research study in the Quintana Roo state. The aim was to identify the sense of SE about the four skills of the language in public secondary school students, determine the students' experiences with the four sources of SE, and establish an association between these sources and the students' sense of SE to learn English.

Rodríguez (2018) chose a cross-sectional explanatory approach for this study and administered a survey to 100 students at the beginning of their second school year. The survey, created by Sansores (2016), covered the four skills of the language. Additionally, each section focused on different areas. The first one focused on every language skill based on the CEFRL -Common European Framework of Reference for Languages- (Council of Europe, 2020) and PRONI -English National Program in basic education in Mexico- (SEP, 2011). The second section focused on the bases of SE presented by Bandura (1997). Finally, the third section focused on a general sense of SE.

The researcher found in this study that all students had a low sense of SE in all their abilities. Another finding regarding the sources of SE was that the students had more vicarious than enactive mastery experiences. Regarding the correlation between the sources of SE and linguistic skills, the researcher found a moderate to strong correlation between the four skills and SE.

Colugio (2021) conducted another qualitative case study on SE to explore the SE of Mexican students learning English while studying in Belize. The study aimed to understand how the four sources of self-efficacy influence

learners' beliefs about their ability to learn English in a foreign context.

Three Mexican students (two females and one male), aged 11 to 15, participated in the study. All had only basic English skills when they enrolled in an English-speaking high school in Belize. Although their schooling occurred in Belize, the research was conducted in Chetumal, Quintana Roo.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions conducted in the students' homes. Colugio (2021) analysed the data using Creswell's qualitative methodology (2009), organising codes into thematic categories.

Findings showed that the students' self-efficacy was initially high while still in Mexico, dropped during the first months in Belize, and increased again after half the academic year. Verbal persuasion and psychological affective states were the most influential of the four sources of self-efficacy. In contrast, vicarious experiences had the least impact on the students' self-efficacy.

Another exploratory qualitative study by Reyes-Cruz and Murrieta-Loyo (2017) examined SE among future English teachers enrolled in a public university in southeastern Mexico. Their research aimed to explore students' sense of SE and how it was influenced by prior teaching experience.

The study involved ten students (five males and five females) from the 2015 cohort, aged 21–23, who were enrolled in "Teaching Practice II" at that time. The primary instrument employed was an interview.

Findings revealed that most participants had teaching experience before beginning their formal teacher training. This experience positively influenced their SE, particularly when teaching at the same educational level they had previously taught. However, when assigned to different levels, their SE tended to decrease.

The study also found a correlation between English proficiency and SE. Students with English certifications, such as the CAE, reported a higher sense of SE in teaching. Nonetheless, the research also identified cases of a false sense of SE in students with low proficiency and limited teaching skills who nevertheless believed they had high SE.

Combining SE and LLS

Different studies worldwide have focused, sometimes separately, on LLS and SE of students learning English as a foreign language. Little research has been conducted on these two subjects combined. One of the most relevant studies in the Latin American context is the one by Montañó-Gonzalez and Cancino (2020), in which they explored the relationship between SE beliefs and language learning strategies among the accounting students in a public Chilean university. Using a sequential

explanatory mixed-methods design approach, they focused on the nature and frequency of the LLSs that the students used when learning English and the relationship between the learners' choice of strategies and their SE beliefs.

After analysing data from 62 answers to two adapted questionnaires, one for LLS and another for English SE, and 4 interviews, the researchers found that the participants were medium strategy users, which indicates that they needed to increase their use of LLS to learn English more effectively. The findings also showed that participants perceived themselves as having a medium level of SE, which meant they needed to foster their perceptions of their abilities in EFL. On the contrary, they found a significant positive relationship between LLS and SE, which means that participants who used a wide range of LLS also reported a healthy dose of SE.

First language acquisition and foreign language learning

To understand the process of foreign language learning, it is necessary to know how individuals acquire their first language. Lightbown and Spada (1999) explained first language acquisition from different perspectives. The first comes from the behaviourist theory, claiming that first language acquisition resulted from imitation, practice, and feedback on success, and habit formation. The following explanation comes from the innatist theory, presented by Noam Chomsky. Chomsky (1999, as cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1999) claimed that individuals possessed a universal grammar device. Thus, "children's minds are not blank slates to be filled merely by imitating language they hear in the environment. Instead, he claims that children are born with a special ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system" (p.16).

Krashen (1982) presented the latest theory on first language acquisition with his input theory. Johnson (2004) mentions that in this theory, language acquisition happens in only one way: by understanding messages and receiving comprehensible input. Here, the comprehensible input is represented as $i+1$; i represents the learner's current language competence, and 1 is the next level of competence in the natural development order. With this theory, Krashen (1982) also states that the acquisition process is given naturally and is a subconscious process enabled by the internal language processor, the Language Acquisition Device presented by Chomsky (1965).

Concerning foreign language learning, Punchihetti (2013) claims that a foreign language is not always connected to the culture of the person who is learning it; hence, it is the individual's choice to start learning that specific language. This might also mean that the learner of the language is

unable to use that language in their everyday life, as it is not a language that everybody understands in that particular country.

The learning process theory of a foreign language correlates with the contemporary language acquisition process theory. Thus, Lightbown and Spada (2006) claimed that, with behaviourism, scholars believed that learning resulted from an imitation practice, reinforcement, and habit formation, and EFL teachers used the audiolingualism approach. Then, they also put forward that with the trends of sociocultural perspective in foreign language learning came Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, which claims that a learner will learn the language from another individual who performs at a higher level because he is providing support to those with lower-level performance; hence, learning is the result of social interaction.

One of the latest trends in foreign language learning is Krashen's input theory. Krashen (1982) mentioned that the input theory meant that a second language is not learned but acquired. Acquisition occurs only when the meaning of the language is understood; this goes beyond the understanding of the form, which is often seen as the most essential part of language learning. Conversely, "the input hypothesis says the opposite. It says we acquire by 'going for meaning' first, and as a result, we acquire structure! (Krashen, 1982, p. 21)".

LLS Theory

Language learning strategies are key when learning a new language; thus, different scholars have defined them throughout history. In fact, O'Malley (1990) presented his own taxonomy of strategies: metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies.

Additionally, Oxford (2017) defined them as complex, dynamic thoughts and actions selected and used by learners with some degree of consciousness in specific contexts to regulate multiple aspects of themselves (such as cognitive, emotional, and social) for (a) accomplishing language tasks; (b) improving language performance or use; and/or (c) enhancing long-term proficiency. Strategies are mentally guided but may also have physical and, therefore, observable manifestations. Learners often use strategies flexibly and creatively; combine them in various ways, such as strategy clusters or strategy chains; and orchestrate them to meet learning needs. Strategies are teachable. Learners in their contexts decide which strategies to use. Appropriateness of strategies depends on multiple personal and contextual factors.

Oxford (2001) also presented a taxonomy of language learning strategies that students mostly use when learning a new language. This is presented below.

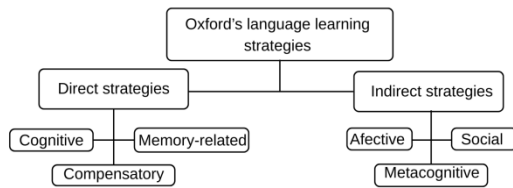


Figure 1. Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies (2001).

In sum, LLS are defined as actions that students take consciously to improve their one or more language skills. These actions are ordered and must have a clear objective.

SE theory

Self-efficacy (SE) can be determined by how capable an individual feels of performing and accomplishing any given task in a particular context with a certain difficulty level. This theory helped explain the feelings of some students not only towards activities inside the classroom, but also in real-life scenarios.

Artino (2012) defines SE as "a personal belief in one's capability to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. Often described as task-specific self-confidence, self-efficacy has been a key component in theories of motivation and learning in varied contexts" (p. 76).

This theory's importance in language acquisition is its claim that learning the required skills that are part of the learning curricula is not enough; the learners need to feel motivated towards the specific task at hand.

Bhati and Sethy (2022) argue that "the acquisition of required skills and abilities is not sufficient for a person to perform a task; he must have the belief in his abilities that he can undertake the task under difficult settings" (p. 1124). The motivation that fuels the sense of high SE must come from somewhere. That is why Bandura (1997) proposed four primary sources of information in social learning analysis: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal.

Bandura (1997) claimed that performance accomplishments come from prior accomplishments; the vicarious experience comes from watching others perform specific tasks; verbal persuasion tries to provoke particular behaviour by providing positive comments to the individual, hoping they will get convinced they can perform the task. The last source is emotional arousal, which results from stressful and taxing situations, which

might provide the individual with valuable information about personal competence.

Bhati and Sethy (2022) proposed another source of SE: academic SE, which they claimed "can be measured by different dimensions of students' academic works like learning process, reading and comprehension, memory, goal orientation, utilisation of resources, peer relations, relationship with teacher, time management, examination and adjustment in academic setting and many other aspects of academic world" (p. 1124).

Finally, in the case of EFL, a student's SE can be determined by how capable they feel of performing any task in any of the four skills of the language or how capable they feel of facing a real-world situation in which they need to perform in a communicative situation that requires them to use more than one language skill at once.

Methodology

This study employs a sequential mixed-method case study design within the constructivist paradigm, as Creswell (2009) described. The initial quantitative phase identified participants who met specific criteria, while the qualitative phase explored their experiences in depth (Nagpal et al., 2020). The case study focuses on a group of university students enrolled in an English language program at a public institution in Mexico.

This study uses quantitative and qualitative methods through methodological triangulation, enhancing its validity. The constructivist paradigm emphasises co-constructing knowledge with participants, prioritising their perspectives and experiences. As Creswell (2009) notes, understanding participants' social and contextual interactions is essential for grasping their meaning-making. A key goal is to highlight participants' voices and rely on their interpretations of the examined situation.

Context and participants

This study was conducted in a public university in Mexico. The students who participated were in their first year of university studies and enrolled in the English culture and language teaching B.A. program. They were following the pre-intermediate English course, which meant that, according to the program's curriculum, their English proficiency level had to be at the B1 level of the CEFRL (2020). For the quantitative phase, the questionnaire was administered to 86 students using the convenience sampling criteria; however, only 67 agreed to participate in the study.

From the qualitative phase, 16 students with a low SE score were selected, using criterion sampling, and were offered to be interviewed. Only seven attended the interview: five women and two men, aged 20 to 24. All of them came from public urban high schools, and even

though the public curriculum has English as a subject, the students mentioned not having had a strong English learning experience during those years of education, and none had a formal English language proficiency certification. Additionally, even though they all lived in Xalapa City, six came from different parts within the state of Veracruz, and one came from the state of Oaxaca. The students' real names were changed to protect their identities.

Data collection and analysis

Given the mixed-method nature of this study, data collection was carried out in two sequential phases using both quantitative and qualitative tools. In the quantitative phase, a Likert scale questionnaire was administered to identify participants based on their perceived levels of self-efficacy. Jamieson (2024) defines a Likert scale as a rating system used in questionnaires to measure people's attitudes, opinions, or perceptions. Here, individuals choose from various possible responses to a specific question or statement. The options that people can choose from in this scale usually go from "strongly disagree", "agree", "neutral", "disagree", and "strongly disagree".

The questionnaire used in this research was designed in a previous study by Kutut et al. (2022), who developed a standardised self-efficacy questionnaire for L2 learners. This questionnaire contained eleven composite questions that covered all the skills needed for each learner according to their level of proficiency: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

This instrument allowed for a standardised measure of key variables and supported selecting participants for the second phase. In the qualitative phase, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and notes from a research journal kept throughout the study. Flick (1998, p. 76) explains that

"Semi-structured interviews, in particular, have attracted interest and are widely used. This interest is linked to the expectation that the interviewed subject's viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in a relatively openly designed interview than in a standardised interview or a questionnaire".

The interviews provided in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. At the same time, the research journal served as a supplementary tool for capturing contextual observations and researcher reflections. Annik (2017) explains that a research journal is a tool for observing, questioning, critiquing, synthesising, and acting. She also mentions that reflexivity emphasises the researcher's awareness of the research process and can improve the quality of research. For data analysis, median measures of central tendency were applied to the quantitative responses. As Sullivan et al. (2013) put forward, scholars have argued that the

median should be used to measure central tendency for Likert scale data over the years. With this method, the researcher could ensure that only the students with low SE sense were selected for the following research phase. In contrast, thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data, incorporating both interview transcripts and journal notes to identify patterns and emerging themes. Braun and Clarke (2023) define this method as "a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset concerning a research question; possibly the most widely used qualitative method of data analysis, but not 'branded' as a specific method until recently" (p. 175). This combination of methods ensured a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research problem.

Findings

This section presents the study's main findings, which aimed to explore the LLS employed by students with a low sense of SE in an English language undergraduate program. The analysis of the qualitative data, obtained through semi-structured interviews and supported by the research journal, revealed three key categories: contextual use of LLS, lack of LLS use, and perceptions towards LLS. These categories emerged through thematic analysis and reflect how students approach or avoid language learning strategies concerning their self-efficacy beliefs. The first section explores how some students selectively employ strategies depending on specific learning contexts. The second highlights cases where students either lack awareness of or consciously avoid using LLS. Finally, the third section examines students' attitudes, beliefs, and understanding of the usefulness of these strategies. Together, these findings offer a nuanced view of the challenges and behaviours of students with low self-efficacy, providing valuable insight into their actual learning needs.

Learning in context

The students in this subcategory were asked contextual questions to discover if they used any language learning strategies. Their answers showed that some strategies were more commonly used than others. The four strategies mentioned are discussed in more detail in the analysis below.

Thinking in Action

This strategy was one of the most mentioned by the participants of this study. When the participants were asked what they did to learn new vocabulary or how they remembered the things they had learned during class, they mentioned activities that could be linked to a **cognitive strategy**.

For example, Omar answered, “I create cards, flashcards, and review the phrasal verbs that we saw, but it is not that often, honestly”. The participant reports occasionally using the cognitive strategy of **creating flashcards** to review phrasal verbs, which involves **synthesising** and **reorganising information**. However, using words like “sometimes” and “honestly” suggests this strategy is likely applied as part of class assignments rather than through self-directed learning.

Another similar response to these questions was from Sandra, “I specifically create flashcards; those are the ones I create the most.” Sandra’s answer shows she constantly creates new material to support her English learning. She not only creates flashcards related to vocabulary but also actively **creates** new materials related to the topics she sees in class, which will help her retain the information.

Another answer that could be classified as a cognitive strategy is the one provided by Aby, “I take notes, not precisely in my notebook, but I always write in the book. I **also take notes** on the book with colours; most of them are colours for new vocabulary.” It can be inferred that she uses a colour system to classify the new vocabulary presented during their English lessons. Also, the fact that she writes her notes directly in the book could mean that she aims to classify them by topic and relevance.

Learning how to learn

This section focuses on metacognitive strategies, which emerged frequently in the students’ responses. The excerpts presented below were given in response to questions such as: “What strategies do you use to learn English?” and “What do you do when an English test is approaching and there’s a topic you don’t understand but know will be included?”

Aby answered this question: “Well, if it is a topic I know will be on the test, I study it. I go to my list of topics and things to do. I normally write short summaries, adding examples, different colours for words, and new vocabulary. I do not study in lengthy study sessions, but I take some breaks, and I use spaced repetition.”

The information from above could be interpreted as this participant being aware of what helps her learn better and faster. She has identified what works for her, and she can plan study sessions, collect data, transform it, and correct her mistakes. It could also be understood that this participant’s metacognitive strategies are advanced; this is based on the use of the words “spaced repetition.”

Sandra also uses an advanced metacognitive strategy: “Well, on the same day, in the afternoon, I rewrite my notes on the computer, and from there, I use one of two videos that explain the topic. From there, I look for visual things and try to write stories. I write it many times if necessary because it works or flashcards...”

The participant has a complex approach to organising her learning. By reviewing notes daily and supplementing them with videos, she demonstrates the ability to monitor and evaluate her understanding and learning preferences. Her use of various tasks, such as researching, writing, and processing information, suggests a strategic method that may lead to more efficient and effective learning.

Anchoring language

Memory strategies may seem simple, but they are valuable for language learning, especially vocabulary. Participants gave clear examples of using such strategies when asked how they remember or learn new words.

Aby answered these questions: “When I want to remember a word, I normally link it with similar sounds that I remember.” From this information, it can be understood that this participant uses the memory strategy to recall new words. This system is made of sounds, so she might combine her listening skills with the memory strategy to develop patterns of vocabulary that make it easy for her to use when needed.

Another clear example of memory strategy use is the one mentioned by **Sandra**: “I match them, either by context or by some image. At some point, a teacher mentioned something about a mental castle; you go into your head, and create, for example, a little house, and you give a word to each thing in there.”

This information could be interpreted as an already-developed memory strategy. She mentions that a teacher presented it to them. The example of the house being built with the information she is receiving could be an example of a real construction of knowledge that uses the capacity of the brain to store information.

From connection to competence

Being social becomes crucial for learners when learning a foreign language, as it will help them practice it. Ultimately, the language has a cultural and social competency that can only be practised by talking to others. The participants were asked who they went to when they had doubts or needed to practice their oral and listening skills. Their answers were the following. Sandra: “I get the support of two classmates, they already have a more advanced English level, and they explain things to me or we practice speaking together because sometimes I struggle with it. And regarding writing, they correct some little things I do not get correctly.”

It can be understood that this strategy is well-known, and this individual knows how to apply it. This is because she has identified those friends who are at a higher level, and then she takes advantage of this and gets their support. This also could mean that she and those two students she gets help from were just classmates who helped each other before becoming friends.

A different social strategy experience was shared by Omar, a person who defines himself as introverted but could find a way to use this social strategy to his advantage. He mentioned using social media platforms like Hello Talk.

"Right now, I do not use it anymore, but I used to log in to talk with native speakers, which helped me express myself." The information suggests that introverted students do not need a physical setting to practice language through interaction. Virtual platforms designed for language exchange offer an alternative. This reflects a student's willingness to use social strategies with native speakers, showing that virtual interaction can be a valuable option when in-person contact is not possible.

In this emerging category, it was shown that some of the participants used some LLS, and that those who implemented them had advanced development of them. From these findings, these students with a low sense of SE could eventually succeed in their studies and elevate their self-efficacy level. Oxford (2017) mentioned that language learning strategies play a crucial role in mastering a foreign language.

Unstrategic learning

This emerging category resulted from some students' answers to questions like "What LLS do you use to learn English?" or any other contextual question that sought real-life examples of LLS use. The participants who answered that they do not have or apply LLS when learning English gave the following answers.

Andrew's response was, "I do not make any notes in class; it distracts me a lot. Sincerely, I do not feel I have a fixed strategy. I feel like I am someone who does a lot of things to try to learn. I use a lot of methods, and I do different things; I do not always keep the same strategy."

Lily's answer was, "I do not think there is one. To learn grammar, I do exercises."

The answers from these two participants could be interpreted as a lack of awareness of the LLS use. The answers also mean that they do not know any strategy formally, which is possible, but contradictory at the same time. This is because these students, in their B.A. program, must take a special course on using and implementing LLS during the first academic year. At the time of the interview, the participants were already starting the second year. Finally, these answers could mean that these students are still at the early stages of their LLS development, where they can only detect their learning styles, which at higher levels could evolve into formal LLS.

Useful or useless?

This category explored participants' perceptions of LLS. In response to questions about their usefulness, participants generally expressed an optimistic view, agreeing that LLS have been helpful in their English

learning and will likely remain beneficial, even as their proficiency increases.

Omar answered this question: "In reality, I do feel that they are helpful for... anybody who is learning English or has long been learning it. The strategy I have seen the most is regarding vocabulary, and even people who know English well are still in need of vocabulary sometimes. I feel they are useful."

From this evidence, it can be inferred that the participant uses strategies to help enrich his vocabulary. This individual is aware that learning a foreign language can become a lifelong learning journey that will always require him to learn something new, in this case, vocabulary.

Another interviewee, Andrew, when asked the same questions, reported, "No, in my opinion, those strategies will always be helpful." This answer also shows that this participant has a positive vision of using LSS. It could be inferred that the participant strongly relies on them to achieve some goals of their learning process.

However, **Lily** had a slightly different opinion: "They will not become useless, but I feel that I will need them a little less. Well, I feel like I could implement more, though."

From this, it could be inferred that, contrary to what Andrew thinks, this participant does not rely much on using strategies to learn English. This feeling might result from not having implemented the strategies correctly in the past. However, the participant also shows a hint of hope for the strategy used when mentioning "but I could implement more". Here, it could be understood that even though she does not think she will implement the strategies as much in the future, she feels that they could result in successful learning if she implements more of them now.

The findings in this category show that students generally have a positive perception of LLS, both past and future, as tools for learning English. This view may stem from the positive outcomes they have experienced. In cases where students doubt their usefulness, Oxford (2017) explains that not using these strategies appropriately would result in a slower learning process, suggesting that low SE may be linked to ineffective strategy use.

These results align with Robledo's (2014) findings, which showed that students who benefit from LLS often see them as valuable lifelong learning tools. Moreover, this positive perception is reinforced when learners use strategies to improve performance in their language courses. Giang (2018) also supports this, stating that there is a high correlation between the results of EFL tests and the LLS regarding language skills.

Implications

The implications of these findings go beyond our school context. For the teachers of English as a foreign language in the Mexican public sector, it could be complicated to

identify each student struggling to implement language learning strategies. Additionally, the information provided by this research could be used to the student's advantage. Compared to results from other studies, it is demonstrated that using LLS can help students achieve higher levels of language proficiency. Even if this process takes time to be enhanced in the students, efforts should be made to promote the use of LLS among the students.

The last implication of this research is the importance of collective learning or social strategy. One student mentioned that she attended a group where everybody helped each other in any skill that needed to be improved, which was said to be very helpful for this student. Another participant mentioned using social media to interact with native speakers, as he was too shy to speak with his classmates. In both cases, physically or virtually, the students declared that this strategy was helpful. Given the nature of the language learning field, all students should be invited to have some social interaction at the moment of learning the language, whether at school, with their friends, or in a virtual environment, as this will help them thrive in their learning. They should also be warned of the risks of online interaction, especially when talking to people they do not know.

Conclusion

Language learning strategies are an essential factor in the language learning process. Oxford (2017) highlights their relevance by mentioning that if well implemented, they could give successful results to the learners. Another essential factor of the EFL learning process is the feeling of capability that the learner perceives in herself or himself: the SE sense. It was defined as such by Artino (2012) as "a personal belief in one's capability to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 17). With those concepts in mind, this research first identified students in the second semester of the English language teaching and learning B.A. program with a low sense of SE to interview them to learn more about their LLS use, if any existed.

Regarding the first question of this study, the research could identify those LLS students with a low sense of self-efficacy. It was demonstrated that some students did not feel that their English level was good enough for the current courses they are following in the B.A. When these participants were interviewed, their answers gave examples of the language learning strategies some of these students use. Still, there was also the realisation that some of them lacked knowledge on implementing them, and some even mentioned not having implemented them.

Those who showed knowledge of these strategies mentioned using cognitive, metacognitive, memory-

related, and social strategies. The metacognitive and cognitive strategies were the most developed strategies among the students. Additionally, some strategies were not used, like affective strategies, and others that were not mentioned, like compensation strategies.

As for the question of how the SE sense impacts the students' choice of LLSs, in some cases, the feeling of having a low sense of SE made the students develop advanced language learning strategies that will eventually help them achieve higher English proficiency levels; nonetheless, there was also a case where this low sense of SE did not positively impact the students' choice of language learning strategies. These students were not interested in using these strategies even when they felt they were not making any advancements in their learning process.

Finally, based on the testimony of a couple of students who expressed not having any specific LLS, it was found that the students lack self-awareness regarding their language learning process. Hence, having a low sense of SE does not always mean that they will develop specific strategies to try to change the situation.

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