

Exploring effective English learning strategies for athlete students at a senior high school

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the English learning strategies employed by athlete students at a senior high school in Kalasan, Yogyakarta, aiming to pinpoint the most effective approaches aligned with their learning preferences. Utilizing a quantitative research design, data were gathered through the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) from 26 athlete students actively involved in diverse sports. The results indicate that cognitive strategies, employed by 76% of participants, emerged as the most prevalent, underscoring the students' inclination toward practical, problem-solving activities. Social strategies, with a 73% usage rate, emphasized the value of collaboration, while affective strategies, at 63%, addressed emotional factors such as motivation and anxiety management. In contrast, compensatory (61%), metacognitive (61%), and memory (59%) strategies showed moderate to lower adoption, suggesting opportunities for further development. The findings highlight cognitive, social, and affective strategies as particularly effective for athlete students, offering practical guidance for educators to adapt teaching methods that balance the competing demands of academic achievement and athletic commitments.

Keywords: *Learning strategies; Athlete students; LLS*

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1. Introduction

In the modern era of globalization, English has become a vital medium for international communication, enabling individuals to connect across diverse cultural, social, and professional boundaries (Mansfield & Poppi, 2012). For students, particularly in countries where English is not the primary language, such as Indonesia, proficiency in English is essential for engaging with global opportunities (Lauder, 2008). Within the Indonesian education system, English is widely taught at various levels and is a core subject in national examinations (Abrar et al., 2018). Despite significant efforts by the government to improve English proficiency, many students continue to face challenges in achieving the expected learning outcomes (Asaloei et al., 2020).

One group of learners encountering difficulties in learning English comprises athlete students. These students often allocate much of their time and energy to rigorous sports training and competitive events, leaving limited focus for academic activities, including English language learning. Their frequent absence from classes, lack of active participation in lessons, and minimal engagement in the learning process make it difficult for them to meet academic standards (Papilaya & Huliselan, 2016). These challenges are particularly evident in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, where mastering the language requires consistent effort, attention, and the application of appropriate strategies (Celce-Murcia, 2017).

Previous research highlights the significance of language learning strategies in addressing obstacles to language acquisition, as they involve intentional techniques employed by learners to enhance their understanding, retention, and application of a new language. Recent studies emphasize that language learning strategies are not only about the intention to learn but also involve specific techniques that can significantly improve learning outcomes. For instance, Anuyahong and Pengnate (2023) demonstrate the effectiveness of mnemonic devices in enhancing vocabulary acquisition, while Karataş et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of memory enhancement techniques in improving second language learning. Additionally, Liu (2017) reveals that tailored glossing techniques can improve incidental vocabulary acquisition, and Nakata & Suzuki (2019) highlight the role of varied practice in supporting long-term language skill retention. Overall, contemporary research underscores the need for effective language learning strategies to overcome the challenges in language acquisition.

This study focuses on exploring effective English learning strategies for athlete students at a junior high school in Kalasan. Acknowledging the competing priorities between their athletic and academic commitments, the research aims to identify strategies that align with their learning preferences. By addressing this gap, the study seeks to provide practical insights and recommendations to help educators optimize the learning process and enable athlete students to achieve better outcomes in mastering English.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction to language learning strategies (LLS)

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) have been a cornerstone of second language acquisition research since the mid-1980s (Hu, 2007). These strategies refer to specific actions, techniques, or processes that learners consciously employ to facilitate language learning and improve their communication skills (Domínguez & Juanías, 2024; Wong et al., 2022). Oxford (1990) defines LLS as deliberate steps taken by learners to make language acquisition more efficient, enjoyable, and transferable to new contexts.

Research on LLS has seen significant growth over time, reflecting its importance in understanding the learning process. Since the first LLS study in 1977, the number of publications has steadily increased, with 383 indexed in the Web of Science databases by 2018 (Kölemen, 2021). The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), developed by Oxford in 1990, has been the primary tool used to assess learners' use of language learning strategies (LLS) across various contexts. Studies utilizing this instrument often explore individual variables such as motivation, gender, and proficiency in English as a foreign language. These factors have been shown to significantly correlate with language acquisition, influencing learners' strategy choices and effectiveness (Kölemen, 2021). In the context of athletes, understanding how these variables interact with their unique learning challenges such as time constraints, physical demands, and stress levels can provide valuable insights into how these factors impact their ability to learn English effectively. By examining the intersection of individual characteristics and contextual factors, a more comprehensive understanding of athletes' language learning processes can be achieved. For athlete students, such tools can be adapted to explore how their unique commitments to sports influence their adoption and effectiveness of language learning strategies.

Recent advancements in LLS research have highlighted the need for more nuanced approaches. While much of the existing work relies on quantitative methods, there is growing interest in qualitative designs that explore cultural influences, strategy instruction, and learning across various educational levels (Domínguez & Juanías, 2024; Noprival et al., 2023). Oxford's (1990) framework remains a critical foundation in these explorations, particularly as researchers integrate LLS with concepts like self-efficacy and content-based learning environments to better understand their impact on learner autonomy and outcomes (Jaekel, 2018).

As the field continues to evolve, LLS research underscores its relevance in supporting effective language learning. For athlete students, who often face challenges such as time constraints and limited classroom engagement, understanding and implementing LLS tailored to their needs could significantly enhance their English learning outcomes. This alignment of strategies with specific learner contexts highlights the ongoing importance of LLS in addressing diverse educational challenges.

2.2. Classification of language learning strategies

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) have been categorized into various frameworks by researchers to better understand how learners acquire, process, and utilize language knowledge effectively. Among these classifications, Oxford's (1990) taxonomy is the most widely recognized and applied in second language acquisition research. Oxford divides LLS into six categories, which are further grouped into two major types: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies involve the active engagement with the target language, while indirect strategies support and manage the learning process without direct use of the language itself (Oxford, 1990).

Direct strategies include memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Memory strategies help learners store and retrieve language information through techniques such as creating mental linkages, using imagery, or employing action (Oxford, 1990). These strategies are particularly useful for vocabulary acquisition and retention. Cognitive strategies focus on the manipulation of language through reasoning, analysing, or practicing. This includes activities like repeating, summarizing, and using translation tools to process language input (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Compensation strategies, on the other hand, enable learners to overcome gaps in their language knowledge, for example guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words from context or using gestures during communication falls under this category (Hardan, 2013).

Indirect strategies, as outlined by Oxford (1990), include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies are centred on planning, organizing, and evaluating the learning process. Learners using these strategies may set goals, monitor their progress, or self-assess their achievements in language learning (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). Affective strategies help learners regulate their emotions, motivation, and attitudes, such as reducing anxiety through relaxation techniques or rewarding oneself for achieving milestones (Oxford, 1990). Lastly, social strategies involve interaction with others to practice the target language, including activities like asking questions, cooperating with peers, or empathizing with others to build communication skills (Oxford, 1990).

Oxford's classification has been particularly influential due to its holistic approach, encompassing both mental processes and social behaviours. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), developed by Oxford (1990), has been widely utilized to measure learners' use of LLS across these categories. It remains one of the most validated and reliable tools in LLS research, with applications in studies across diverse contexts and proficiency levels. Research has shown that more proficient learners tend to employ a broader range of metacognitive strategies, while less proficient learners often rely more heavily on memory-based strategies (Yang, 1994). These findings suggest that learners' strategy use evolves with their language proficiency and learning goals.

Despite the dominance of Oxford's taxonomy, other frameworks have been proposed to address different aspects of language learning. Setiyadi (2014) introduced a skill-based classification focusing on listening, reading, and writing strategies, offering a

more targeted approach to analysing strategy use in specific language skills. Similarly, Ismail et al. (2016) proposed a two-dimensional framework encompassing the technical and language dimensions, which is particularly relevant in personalized and digital learning environments. These alternative classifications highlight the complexity of strategy use and underscore the need for adaptive models that align with learners' individual needs and learning contexts (Domínguez & Juanías, 2024).

For student athletes, who often face challenges such as limited classroom engagement and time constraints, Oxford's taxonomy provides a comprehensive framework to identify and implement effective strategies. For instance, metacognitive strategies can help them plan study sessions around training schedules, while compensation strategies can aid in overcoming gaps caused by frequent absences. The integration of these strategies into teaching practices can significantly enhance their language learning outcomes.

Table 1

Oxford's language learning strategy system (Oxford, 1990).

Type	Category	Description	Examples
Direct Strategies	Memory	Help store and retrieve information.	Creating associations, using imagery, reviewing vocabulary.
	Cognitive	Involve manipulation of the language for understanding and production.	Practicing, summarizing, analyzing, using dictionaries.
	Compensation	Involve manipulation of the language for understanding and production.	Guessing meaning from context, using gestures to communicate.
Indirect Strategies	Metacognitive	Focus on planning, organizing, and evaluating the learning process.	Setting goals, monitoring progress, self-assessing language performance.
	Affective	Help regulate emotions, motivation, and attitudes.	Relaxation techniques, self-encouragement, rewarding oneself for progress.
	Social	Involve interaction with others to enhance language practice.	Asking questions, working with peers, seeking feedback.

(Oxford, 1990)

2.3. Challenges faced by athlete students in English learning

Athlete students face considerable challenges in learning English due to their dual commitments to academics and sports. These challenges stem from factors such as time constraints, physical exhaustion, and limited classroom engagement (Liu & Taresh, 2024). Their demanding schedules often leave little time for study, reducing their ability to attend lessons consistently or practice independently. Liu and Taresh (2024) emphasize that effective time management strategies, such as the "flexible focus" approach, can mitigate this issue. However, without these strategies, many student athletes struggle to balance their academic and athletic priorities.

Physical and mental exhaustion from rigorous training schedules further hinders their learning. After intense practice, athlete students may lack the focus required to actively engage in lessons, leading to disinterest in classroom activities. Over time, this disinterest often results in a perception that English lessons are monotonous or irrelevant to their immediate goals (Nam et al., 2020). This lack of motivation affects their ability to build essential skills, particularly in vocabulary and communication, which require active classroom participation.

Linguistic barriers also play a role, as frequent absences and limited exposure to English outside the classroom can lead to gaps in grammar and vocabulary knowledge. These challenges are exacerbated by cultural factors, such as linguistic hegemony in certain education systems, which restrict opportunities for practical language use (Nam et al., 2020). Additionally, Huang and Tsai (2024) note that the specific demands of different sports can influence language learning. While sports like martial arts may foster discipline that benefits language acquisition, other physically intense sports may leave students with minimal capacity to focus on academics.

Despite these challenges, targeted strategies can help students succeed, including athlete students. Flexible teaching methods, digital learning tools, and interactive classroom activities are effective in accommodating diverse schedules and reigniting interest in English for all students. These strategies create a more inclusive learning environment that supports engagement and motivation, regardless of students' extracurricular commitments. For athlete students, in particular, proficiency in English remains essential in international sports contexts, where communication skills are vital for collaborating with coaches, teammates, and officials from various backgrounds (Rozaq et al., 2021). Addressing these barriers is crucial in supporting both their academic and athletic achievements.

3. Method

This study used a quantitative research design to examine the effective English learning strategies employed by athlete students at a senior high school in Kalasan. The research utilized the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) instrument to collect and analyse quantitative data on the frequency and types of strategies adopted by the students in their language learning process.

3.1. Research context

An observation was conducted at a junior high school in Kalasan to understand the learning environment of the athlete students prior to the study. The observation, carried out on October 1 and October 7, 2024, revealed that many students in English language teaching (ELT) classes appeared fatigued from their rigorous sports training, which often led them to prioritize sports over academics. Additionally, the students demonstrated a lack of motivation to actively participate in class activities. Some students also displayed signs of boredom and disengagement, often showing little interest in the teaching methods used by the teacher and being inattentive during lessons. This lack of motivation was not limited to English, but extended to all subjects, likely due to exhaustion from their sports training and other factors. The findings suggested that conventional teaching strategies might not be suitable for these students. This initial observation justified the need for the study to identify appropriate strategies that could better support their English learning, forming the foundation for the research design and data collection methods.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study were 31 athlete students from junior high school in Kalasan, representing various sports disciplines such as basketball, soccer, and athletics. However, due to ongoing tournaments, 5 students were unavailable, leaving 26 students who completed the study. These participants were purposefully selected based on their active involvement in both academics and sports, ensuring that the research targeted students who faced challenges in balancing these commitments.

3.3. Instrument

The primary instrument for this research was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), adapted by Oxford (1990). This is an established instrument that assesses the extent to which people employ different language learning strategies. These consist of 30 items with six dimensions of strategy; memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategy. The responses were collected using a Likert scale, ranging from 5 (Always), 4 (Often), 3 (Sometimes), 2 (Rarely), to 1 (Never), allowing for a precise measurement of strategy usage.

3.4. Data collection procedure

The SILL questionnaire was administered to all 26 students during a pre-arranged session at the school. Clear instructions were provided to ensure that the students understood the purpose of the questionnaire and how to complete it accurately. The process was supervised to confirm that the responses were filled out completely and correctly. The students took approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire, and assistance was available to clarify any questions or uncertainties about the items.

3.5. Data analysis

The data collected from the SILL questionnaire were analysed using statistical methods to calculate descriptive indicators such as means, standard deviations, and percentages. These analyses identified trends in the use of language learning strategies, highlighting the strategies that were most frequently employed as well as those that were less commonly used within the two main categories (direct and indirect strategies). The findings provided insights into the strategies that the students most needed to enhance their English learning effectively and offered valuable guidance for developing more tailored and impactful teaching approaches.

3.6. Validity and reliability

The SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) instrument has been extensively validated and utilized in numerous studies, with its reliability well-documented (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). This standardized tool, widely applied in diverse educational contexts, has consistently proven suitable for measuring language learning strategies, including among students facing unique academic challenges (Green & Oxford, 1995; Wharton, 2000). Its relevance and trustworthiness made it an appropriate choice for exploring the strategies employed by athlete students at a junior high school in Kalasan.

To ensure data validity and relevance, the questionnaire was adapted to align with the research context and participants. The modified version included 30 items selected from the original 50, categorized as follows: 5 items for memory strategies (items 1–5), 6 for cognitive strategies (items 6–11), 4 for compensation strategies (items 12–15), 7 for metacognitive strategies (items 16–22), 5 for affective strategies (items 23–27), and 3 for social strategies (items 28–30). This adjustment ensured the instrument effectively addressed the specific needs of the research while maintaining its reliability.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings of this study explore the language learning strategies employed by athlete students at a junior high school in Kalasan and identify those most effective in supporting their English learning. The analysis of the SILL questionnaire provides a comprehensive understanding of the preferences and utilization rates of various strategies among these students. The data revealed varied tendencies, highlighting the strategies they frequently employ and those less utilized. These strategies are categorized into Direct Strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensatory) and Indirect Strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social), each playing a distinct role in supporting the students' language acquisition process. By understanding these patterns and the gaps in their learning approaches, educators can tailor instructional methods to better address the unique needs of athlete students who balance academic and athletic commitments. Below is a detailed explanation of the findings.

Table 2

The result of descriptive statistics towards language learning strategies.

Strategies	Total	Mean	SD	%
Memory	385	2.96	0.97	59%
Cognitive	494	3.8	0.86	76%
Compensatory	399	3.07	1.07	61%
Metacognitive	396	3.05	1.02	61%
Affective	411	3.16	0.94	63%
Social	473	3.64	0.98	73%

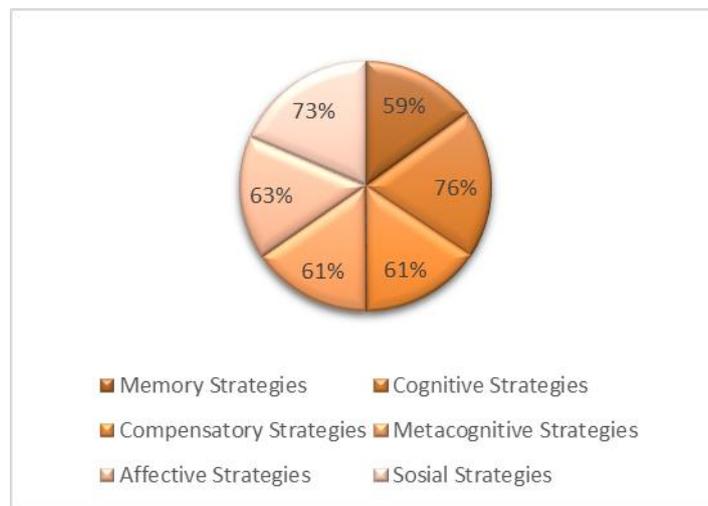


Figure 1. Utilization rates of language learning strategies among athlete students at a junior high school in Kalasan

4.1. Direct strategies

Memory strategies, which involve associating, reviewing, and creating mental linkages, were the least utilized by athlete students, with a mean score of 2.96 and a usage rate of 59%. These results suggest that memory strategies are less appealing to this group, possibly because they prioritize immediate, dynamic learning approaches over abstract memorization techniques. Calderón et al. (2011) support this observation, emphasizing that active and cooperative learning methods are generally more engaging and effective for students who thrive in interactive environments. The findings indicate a potential gap in integrating memory strategies into the students' learning routine, requiring innovative instructional methods to enhance their relevance and application.

Cognitive strategies emerged as the most frequently employed by the students, with a mean score of 3.8 and a utilization rate of 76%. These strategies, encompassing activities like analysing, reasoning, and practicing language, align closely with the repetitive and hands-on nature of sports training routines. This high usage reflects the students' active engagement in internalizing English through structured and practical

exercises. These findings are consistent with Khosravi's (2012) research, which highlights the critical role of cognitive strategies in fostering comprehension and critical thinking. Al-Khaza'leh (2019) further emphasizes that cognitive strategies are instrumental in enabling learners to navigate the complexities of foreign language acquisition through systematic and repetitive initiatives.

Compensatory strategies, with a mean score of 3.07 and a usage rate of 61%, are employed to overcome gaps in language proficiency. Techniques such as guessing meanings from context and using alternative expressions help students adapt to communication barriers. Pratami and Margana (2019) found similar results, indicating that compensatory strategies are valuable for maintaining communication despite limited vocabulary. However, the moderate usage rate among athlete students suggests a need for further reinforcement and consistent practice to maximize their effectiveness.

4.2. Indirect strategies

Metacognitive strategies, which focus on planning, organizing, and self-monitoring, recorded a mean score of 3.05 and a usage rate of 61%. Although these strategies demonstrate some level of self-reflection and organization, the findings reveal room for improvement. Calderón et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of structured goal-setting and self-regulation in improving learning outcomes. The moderate application among athlete students indicates challenges in adopting metacognitive strategies within their learning environment, necessitating explicit instruction and support from educators.

Affective strategies, which address emotional challenges such as anxiety, fatigue, and motivation, had a mean score of 3.16 and a usage rate of 63%. These strategies play a vital role in managing the dual demands of academics and sports, helping students maintain focus and confidence in their English learning. This aligns with Rozaq et al. (2021) findings, which highlight the importance of managing emotions to sustain engagement in language learning. While effective, affective strategies are often underutilized compared to cognitive and social strategies, as noted by Oxford (2011).

Social strategies were the second most utilized, with a mean score of 3.64 and a usage rate of 73%. These strategies leverage collaboration, peer interaction, and cooperative learning, reflecting the teamwork-oriented mindset cultivated through sports. Varişoğlu (2016) observed that social strategies are essential for exposing learners to new knowledge and perspectives through interaction, reinforcing the findings of this study. Interestingly, this study contrasts with Li's (2010) and Kausar's (2012) findings, which identified social strategies as the least utilized among other student populations, highlighting their unique relevance for athlete students at a junior high school in Kalasan.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the English language learning strategies adopted by athlete students at a junior high school in Kalasan, illuminating how these approaches bolster

academic progress amid their sports commitments. The findings reveal that cognitive, social, and affective strategies proved most effective. Cognitive strategies—such as analyzing and practicing language—aligned seamlessly with the athletes’ preference for hands-on learning and emerged as the most widely utilized. Social strategies, centered on peer interaction and teamwork, strongly echoed the students’ collaborative experiences in sports. Meanwhile, affective strategies supported emotional regulation, sustained motivation, and alleviated anxiety, proving essential for juggling academic and athletic demands.

Although compensatory and metacognitive strategies were employed, their impact remained moderate. The study underscores the value of a balanced approach, blending direct strategies (e.g., cognitive and compensatory) with indirect ones (e.g., social and affective), to optimize language acquisition and overall performance for athletes. Educators are encouraged to weave these strategies into their instructional practices, fostering a supportive and dynamic learning environment tailored to these students’ unique needs.

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