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Language learning strategies of Colombian learners of English as a foreign language

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ABSTRACT

While some studies about language learning strategies (LLS) have been held in Colombia, there is still ample room for research. Particularly, an explanatory sequential mixed methods design can offer insights into how gender, grade level, and perceived language proficiency may influence Colombian students' selection of strategies for learning English. Furthermore, teachers' explicit instruction of strategies has not commonly been contrasted with students' reported use of strategies. This study sought to bridge existing gaps by exploring the favored learning strategies of Colombian learners and teachers at the secondary school level. Data were collected employing the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning and semi-structured interviews with selected participants. The findings suggest that students favor social and metacognitive strategies and use affective strategies to a lesser extent. No significant differences between gender and the overall use of learning strategies were found. Conversely, significant relationships involving students' grade level, self-perception of English proficiency, and the reported use of LLS were observed. This investigation highlights the importance of boosting affective strategies, exploring teachers' roles in explicit strategies-based instruction, and integrating diverse types of data to explore the complexity of learning strategies. Recommendations for future inquiries are presented.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies (LLS) research has garnered significant attention in the field of language education in recent decades [1]–[3]. Researchers, linguists, and educators have shown great interest in both learners' strategies and strategies-based instruction as an appealing approach to boost language proficiency [3]–[5]. Delving into how learners employ a diverse array of strategies to enhance their language acquisition has played a pivotal role in refining teaching methodologies and advancing the cause of effective learning. Central to this endeavor has been the implementation of well-structured strategies-based training programs. As underscored by Griffiths [3], there is a growing emphasis on providing scaffolding and progressively transferring the responsibility for learning strategies to students throughout their process of language learning.

The early definition of LLS put forth by Rubin [6, p. 43], which described them as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" might have led to a lack of consensus, criticism, and even calls for the adoption of the term self-regulation to approach the strategic behaviors involved in

language learning [7]. However, through joint efforts toward the development of LLS, research has reconciled the concept of LLS with self-regulation, arguing that neither self-regulation nor learning strategies need to be sacrificed amid the ongoing debates [8]. According to Griffiths and Cansiz [9, p.476], "LLS are actions chosen (either deliberately or automatically) for the purpose of learning or regulating the learning of language." They further claimed that an effective use of strategies may depend on a complex combination of the number, frequency, and coordination of the strategies. The authors highlighted key attributes of LLS, underlining their active, intentional, automatic, selective, and goal-oriented nature. The first endeavors to identify, categorize, and evaluate strategic behaviors toward language learning, as well as teachers' roles in promoting strategies, can nowadays be considered a mature construct born in the field of applied linguistics [10]. Particularly noteworthy is Oxford's comprehensive taxonomy [1], which classifies LLS into six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. This organization, which has become one of the most prominent and influential frameworks in the field of LLS, was adopted in this study. A more detailed description of the six categories and subsets of strategies used by the participants in this investigation is provided in the results section.

Numerous studies have explored the possible impact of gender and grade level on the use of LLS [11]–[13]. Likewise, other studies investigated more deeply the interplay between LLS and English proficiency, identifying that individuals with higher levels of English proficiency tend to employ LLS more frequently [14]–[16]. In Colombia, research into the exploration and promotion of strategies for learning English has led to noteworthy progress, particularly with the aid of action research designs [17]–[20]. At school level, in a study that investigated the impact of feedback based on strategies on eight sixth graders' performance in oral tasks, Sisquiarco *et al*. [21] found that teachers' instructions of specific metacognitive and cognitive strategies, followed by feedback advising the use of LLS, boosted learners' autonomy, confidence, and competence in oral presentations. Becerra *et al*. [22] analyzed the impact of metacognitive strategies on 41 learners' vocabulary learning. The results proved that the participants developed metacognitive awareness regarding their vocabulary acquisition, leading to improved lexical competence. Research in Colombia has also adopted other foci to a lesser extent to explore the field of LLS. Martín and Cabrera [23], for instance, employed grounded theory to explore how metacognitive and vocabulary learning strategies influenced the performance and autonomy levels of 30 high schoolers engaged in a task for learning vocabulary. The results indicated noteworthy improvements in the adoption of learning strategies, the integration of metacognitive behaviors, and the enhancement of students' overall autonomy. In a case study conducted by Villalba Ramos [24], the focus was on exploring the process of English language learning of a visually impaired student (VIS). The study reported the use, effectiveness, and improved performance of the VIS when employing a combination of LLS. Gómez *et al*. [25] set out to examine the relationship between LLS and language learning beliefs of 303 students with the aid of a quantitative approach. The results indicated a high use of social strategies and gender disparities in the use of memory strategies.

In the Colombian context, where the pursuit of foreign language proficiency has taken on a special significance and has been recognized as a vital skill for academic, professional, and personal growth, there is still a need for exploration regarding the specific strategies that high school students favor when learning English. Additionally, there is a need for further research that focuses on investigating teachers' explicit instruction of strategies and making comparisons between the strategies reported by mentors and mentees, both in terms of their chosen strategies and instructional practices. Thus, the present paper reports the findings of an investigation intended to contribute to the existing knowledge of LLS research in Colombia by filling this gap and examining how gender, grade level, and self-perception of language proficiency may influence students' selection of strategies. Consequently, this investigation is driven by these research questions:

i) What strategies do Colombian high schoolers favor to learn English as a foreign language?
ii) Do gender, grade level, and self-perception of English proficiency influence the use of strategies by Colombian students in learning English?
iii) Are there any significant differences between students' reported use of strategies to learn English and their teachers' reported instruction of strategies?

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This investigation complied with the characteristics of an explanatory sequential mixed methods study [26]. Therefore, a priority was placed on the quantitative data collected employing an inventory and qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews followed up to gain insights into how gender, grade level, and self-perceived language proficiency may influence the selection of strategies by Colombian

students in learning English, allowing the research to profit from specific techniques based on quantitative and qualitative perspectives [27], [28].

2.2. Participants

This investigation employed a convenience sample to explore students' use of LLS within the Colombian context [26]. The participants available for this study consisted of two groups: i) 416 high school students (199 male, 209 female, and 8 who preferred not to answer) at two public schools in Bogotá and ii) nine of their English teachers. The age range of the student participants varied between 11 and 19 years. Most learners expressed their desire to learn English and acknowledged its importance in developing professionally, succeeding at school, and studying abroad. Table 1 summarizes the number and grade level of students participating in this research.

Table 1. Distribution of students according to their grade level

Grade level	Number of participants	%
Sixth	70	16.8
Seventh	69	16.6
Eighth	65	15.6
Ninth	69	16.6
Tenth	60	14.4
Eleventh	83	19.9

2.3. Data collection and analysis

In this study, two instruments were employed to attain the objectives set: the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and semi-structured interviews. Even though the SILL was published more than 30 years ago, its inclusion in this study was justified by the popularity it has gained in the field of LLS [29], [30]. The SILL, a 50-item structured questionnaire, rated on a 5-point scale, was translated into the participants' native language (Spanish) and, in some cases, items were rephrased to help comprehensibility, as suggested by Amerstorfer [31]. This six-part questionnaire showed good values of internal consistency reliability in every subscale assessing the specific types of strategies: memory (α = 0.779), cognitive (α = 0.897), compensation (α = 0.729), metacognitive (α = 0.873), affective (α = 0.720), and social (α = 0.759). Mean values (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) were computed for each strategy type, using Oxford's [1] suggested classification key: high (ranging from 3.5 to 5.0), medium (from 2.5 to 3.4), and low (falling between 1.0 to 2.4). Additionally, an independent-samples *t*-test and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to identify whether gender and grade level, respectively, affected LLS use.

The 50 items of this questionnaire were also adapted for gathering teachers' reports of their instruction of LLS (e.g., for item 34, As a teacher, I teach my students to plan their schedules so they will have enough time to study English). After permission from the school boards and reception of informed consents from participants, 416 survey responses from students and nine from teachers who voluntarily agreed to participate in this research were considered for analysis. Data regarding students' age, gender, grade level, self-evaluation of their English proficiency, and motivation toward learning English were collected.

In addition, to delve deeper into learners' perceptions and selection of strategies, semi-structured interviews were carried out in Spanish with selected students distributed by gender, academic grade, and their use of LLS (high, medium, and low). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subsequently subjected to qualitative analysis. The semi-structured interviews were built around the following guiding questions: i) what strategies for learning English have your teachers taught you?; ii) do you use any of those strategies? If yes, which ones? If not, is there anything that prevents you from using the strategies you have learned?; iii) are there any strategies your teachers have taught you, but you never or hardly ever use?; iv) what actions should your English teachers take to support your language skill development?; and v) what learning strategies would you recommend if a friend asked you for advice on learning English?

3. RESULTS

3.1. The language learning strategies choices of Colombian students

The respondents indicated employing a wide variety of LLS during their English learning process. Table 2 demonstrates that the participants' overall use of LLS can be classified as medium as all the six strategy types assessed in the SILL ranged from 2.88 to 3.29. Social strategies (*M* = 3.29) and metacognitive strategies (*M* = 3.25) are more commonly employed, while affective strategies (*M* = 2.88) are used to a lesser extent.

Table 2. Students' reported use of language learning strategies

Strategy type	*M (SD)*
Memory	3.09 (0.68)
Cognitive	3.08 (0.78)
Compensation	3.09 (0.77)
Metacognitive	3.25 (0.79)
Affective	2.88 (0.80)
Social	3.29 (0.84)
Overall LLS use	3.12 (0.66)

3.1.1. Memory strategies

Memory strategies are associated with information storage and retrieval. With respect to these strategies, a medium use was identified (M = 3.09). Within this category, which encompasses four sets of strategies related to mental associations, imagery, effective review, and action-oriented approaches, the most frequently used strategies by the surveyed learners involved creating mental associations between the previously acquired knowledge and the new things learned in English (M = 3.53). Learners also relied on the second set of strategies by utilizing imagery (M = 3.50). In contrast, the participants indicated less frequent use of other memory strategies, such as using flashcards to memorize new English vocabulary (M = 2.39) and employing rhymes to represent sounds in memory (M = 2.49).

3.1.2. Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies refer to how students attempt to understand, manipulate, and process the target language. This category of strategies is further divided into four sets related to practice, message reception and transmission, analysis and reasoning, and the creation of structure for language input and output. The participants in the study reported a medium use of cognitive strategies (M = 3.08), with specific emphasis on practicing English sounds (for instance, pronunciation and intonation, M = 3.39) and recombining known English words in common phrases or more well-prepared sentences (M = 3.42). Additionally, data revealed that learners often engaged in the comparison of elements in the new language with those in their own language (M = 3.37). The results suggested that practice does not always take place in natural settings since other strategies, such as practicing naturalistically by participating in conversations (M = 2.70), reading for pleasure (M = 2.64), and writing in English (M = 2.59) were reported to be used to a lesser extent.

3.1.3. Compensation strategies

Students indicated a medium use of this strategy type to address language gaps or limitations in communication (M = 3.09). These strategies become relevant when learners face challenges in understanding and producing English caused by a lack of specific vocabulary, grammar knowledge, or other language elements. Among the two sets of strategies in this category, which encompass 10 specific strategies related to guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing, the surveyed learners indicated high use of strategies to overcome difficulties in reading and listening, guessing intelligently the meaning of unfamiliar words in English (M = 3.56) by using linguistic or other clues. Regarding the productive language skills of speaking and writing, the learners reported a medium use of strategies, such as coining words (M = 3.33) and using mime or gesture (M = 3.27) to ease their communication in English.

3.1.4. Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies encompass higher-order thinking skills utilized by students for effectively planning, monitoring, and evaluating their language learning. These strategies involve learners being aware of their own strengths and areas for improvement. According to students' responses, this strategy type is used at a medium level (M = 3.25), with specific strategies related to listening attentively when someone speaks in English (M = 3.83), attempting to discover ways to become a more effective English learner (M = 3.70), and self-monitoring (M = 3.58) being used with high frequency. On the contrary, other strategies that students resorted to at a lower level to assist their learning are organizing a study schedule for English (M = 2.65) and finding out about language learning by reading as much as possible in English (M = 2.66).

3.1.5. Affective strategies

Affective strategies refer to the emotional and attitudinal aspects of language learning. These strategies focus on managing anxiety, enhancing motivation, and maintaining a positive disposition toward the language learning process. The surveyed learners' use of affective strategies could be characterized as medium (M = 2.88); however, these are the least frequently employed among the six categories of strategies. The most employed strategies by learners are encouraging themselves to speak English despite making

mistakes (*M* = 3.39) and lowering anxiety when they feel worried about using English (*M* = 3.38). On the contrary, strategies like taking their emotional temperature by talking to someone else (*M* = 2.48) and maintaining a learning diary (*M* = 1.97) about their feelings when learning English are not commonly employed.

3.1.6. Social strategies

Social strategies encompass interaction and collaboration with others to facilitate language learning. In this study, the survey responses allowed the identification of student participants' medium use of this strategy type (*M* = 3.29), which can be further divided into three groups related to asking questions, collaborating with others, and empathizing with others. Notably, the high schoolers demonstrated a high frequency of indirect feedback-seeking behaviors from the first set, such as asking others for clarification (*M* = 3.68) and asking for correction (*M* = 3.53). Additionally, in terms of the second set of strategies, learners indicated a medium use of cooperating with proficient speakers (*M* = 3.42), whereas cooperating with their peers was used at a lower level (*M* = 2.96).

3.2. Factors influencing learners' choice of strategies in learning English

3.2.1. Gender

In this study, an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the mean scores of male and female participants in terms of their use of LLS. The results, as presented in Table 3, indicate that both male and female participants reported a medium level of overall use of LLS, with mean scores of 3.16 for males and 3.07 for females. Both groups showed a preference for metacognitive strategies (male *M* = 3.33 and female *M* = 3.16) and social strategies (male *M* = 3.35 and female *M* = 3.25).

Table 3. Results of independent-samples *t*-test examining LLS and gender

Strategy type	Male *M (SD)*	Female *M (SD)*	*t*	*p*
Memory	3.11 (0.67)	3.09 (0.70)	.31	.756
Cognitive	3.13 (0.74)	3.02 (0.81)	1.51	.132
Compensation	3.12 (0.74)	3.07 (0.82)	.59	.557
Metacognitive	3.33 (0.76)	3.16 (0.82)	2.13	.034
Affective	2.95 (0.82)	2.81 (0.79)	1.77	.078
Social	3.35 (0.84)	3.25 (0.85)	1.17	.243
Overall LLS use	3.16 (0.64)	3.07 (0.69)	1.49	.137

In general, male participants reported slightly higher mean values than female participants in all the six categories assessed in the SILL; these mean differences, however, were not found to be statistically significant in most cases ($p > .05$), except concerning metacognitive strategies ($t = 2.13$, $p = .034$). Two specific strategies in this category differed substantially among the participants, namely setting goals and objectives (male *M* = 3.42 vs. female *M* = 3.11, $t = 2.29$, $p = .023$) and seeking practice opportunities (male *M* = 3.45 vs. female *M* = 3.25, $t = 2.82$, $p = .005$). With regard to other categories, two specific affective strategies that showed significant differences were taking risks wisely (male *M* = 3.52 vs. female *M* = 3.23, $t = 3.12$, $p = .002$) and lowering anxiety (male *M* = 3.58 vs. female *M* = 3.21, $t = 2.44$, $p = .015$). It is revealing that, independent of their gender, the participants reported a medium use of LLS (male *M* = 3.16 and female *M* = 3.07), with differences not being significant ($t = 1.49$, $p = .137$).

3.2.2. Grade level

This study assessed whether the participants' choice of LLS was influenced by their grade levels. In general, sixth and eleventh graders reported higher use of LLS than participants in other levels (6th *M* = 3.26 and 11th *M* = 3.20), whereas ninth graders indicated the lowest overall use of LLS (*M* = 2.93). Table 4 shows that metacognitive and social strategies were the most frequently reported strategies by the high schoolers surveyed at every level. In most cases, the choice of LLS was classified as medium as mean values did not surpass the threshold of 3.5. Only in the case of eleventh graders, the reported use of social strategies was high (*M* = 3.53).

A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to evaluate the relationship between grade level and LLS. It is revealing that the independent variable grade level had a significant influence at the $p < .05$ level on cognitive strategies $F(5, 410) = 2.72$, $p = .019$, compensation strategies $F(5, 410) = 2.73$, $p = .019$, and social strategies $F(5, 410) = 2.52$, $p = .029$. Conversely, no significant effect was found on memory strategies $F(5, 410) = 1.97$, $p = .082$, metacognitive strategies $F(5, 410) = 1.68$, $p = .137$, and affective strategies

$F(5, 410) = 1.91$, $p = .091$. A post hoc Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean value for cognitive strategies of the ninth graders was significantly lower than that of eleventh graders ($p = 0.32$). Additionally, ninth graders' use of compensation strategies was significantly lower than tenth graders' ($p = 0.36$). Social strategies also indicated a lower use by ninth graders when compared to eleventh graders ($p = 0.17$).

Table 4. Results of ANOVA between grade level and LLS

Strategy type	6th grade *M (SD)*	7th grade *M (SD)*	8th grade *M (SD)*	9th grade *M (SD)*	10th grade *M (SD)*	11th grade *M (SD)*	*p*
Memory	3.23 (0.73)	3.12 (0.71)	2.97 (0.67)	2.96 (0.68)	3.21 (0.59)	3.08 (0.66)	0.082
Cognitive	3.20 (0.80)	2.93 (0.75)	3.08 (0.80)	2.86 (0.77)	3.12 (0.68)	3.24 (0.81)	0.019
Compensation	3.20 (0.80)	3.01 (0.79)	3.01 (0.79)	2.87 (0.76)	3.27 (0.71)	3.20 (0.74)	0.019
Metacognitive	3.46 (0.78)	3.24 (0.84)	3.18 (0.83)	3.09 (0.84)	3.23 (0.67)	3.27 (0.74)	0.137
Affective	3.11 (0.87)	2.83 (0.85)	2.79 (0.79)	2.72 (0.80)	2.94 (0.73)	2.89 (0.78)	0.091
Social	3.37 (0.88)	3.19 (0.91)	3.27 (0.83)	3.09 (0.88)	3.25 (0.68)	3.53 (0.79)	0.029

3.2.3. Perceived proficiency in English

In this investigation, the participants were asked to conduct a self-assessment of their English proficiency, positioning themselves on a four-point scale ranging from "excellent" to "poor" in comparison to their colleagues. The findings, presented in Table 5, suggest a positive association between a higher perceived English proficiency and greater utilization of LLS. Specifically, students who reported excellent perceived proficiency (N = 43) also reported an overall high selection of strategies ($M = 3.65$). Among these students, cognitive strategies ($M = 3.86$), metacognitive strategies ($M = 3.96$), and social strategies ($M = 3.80$) were found to be employed more frequently, with significant mean differences observed compared to other learners' strategy use, ranging from 0.31 to 0.56. Conversely, 28 participants who self-assessed their English proficiency as poor also indicated a lower frequency of strategy use. About 40% of the participants reported having a good proficiency in English, which agreed with their medium use of LLS. Furthermore, approximately 42% of the participants rated their English proficiency as fair, which was also consistent with their moderate use of LLS.

Table 5. LLS and English perceived proficiency

Strategy type	Excellent *M (SD)*	Good *M (SD)*	Fair *M (SD)*	Poor *M (SD)*
Memory	3.49 (0.76)	3.28 (0.60)	2.92 (0.62)	2.49 (0.63)
Cognitive	3.86 (0.72)	3.30 (0.67)	2.79 (0.68)	2.34 (0.58)
Compensation	3.53 (0.81)	3.27 (0.73)	2.92 (0.73)	2.45 (0.53)
Metacognitive	3.96 (0.73)	3.49 (0.69)	2.96 (0.69)	2.48 (0.65)
Affective	3.26 (0.89)	3.04 (0.83)	2.70 (0.72)	2.45 (0.61)
Social	3.80 (0.89)	3.49 (0.76)	3.07 (0.79)	2.71 (0.83)
Overall LLS use	3.65 (0.67)	3.31 (0.59)	2.89 (0.59)	2.49 (0.50)

3.3. Teachers' reported instruction of language learning strategies

Teachers play a pivotal role with regard to the effective promotion of LLS in their classes. As a part of LLS research that needs more emphasis, the nine teachers surveyed in this study indicated a high instruction of LLS ($M = 3.79$), as depicted in Table 6. Notably, metacognitive strategies ($M = 4.00$) and social strategies ($M = 3.91$) were found to be the most promoted strategies. Within these two categories, the teachers reported that students are highly encouraged to use strategies like paying attention ($M = 4.22$), planning their learning by setting goals and objectives ($M = 4.22$), evaluating their learning ($M = 4.22$), asking for clarification in English ($M = 4.44$), and cooperating with peers or proficient users of English ($M = 4.22$). On the other hand, according to teachers' responses, affective strategies ($M = 3.56$) and compensation strategies ($M = 3.37$) are promoted to a lesser extent with significant differences, with strategies like writing a language learning diary to keep track of feelings when learning English ($M = 2.00$) and coining words to compensate for a lack of specific knowledge ($M = 1.78$).

Overall, teachers' reported instruction of LLS proved to be higher than learners' reported use of LLS ($M = 3.79$ vs. $M = 3.12$, respectively). This applied to all the types of strategies assessed in this study, with mean differences ranging from 0.28 to 0.77. In most cases, teachers' indicated instruction of LLS was high for the categories included in the SILL (mean values above 3.5), whereas students' strategy application was in the medium range since the strategies assessed did not surpass the threshold of 3.5. Nonetheless, there are certain similarities regarding metacognitive and social strategies as they are preferred by mentors and

mentees (M = 4.00 and M = 3.91 vs. M = 3.25 and M = 3.29, respectively), whereas affective and compensation strategies showed a lower use for both teachers and students (M = 3.56 and M = 3.37 vs. M = 2.88 and M = 3.09, respectively).

Table 6. Teachers' reported instruction of LLS

Strategy type	*M (SD)*
Memory	3.86 (0.70)
Cognitive	3.83 (0.35)
Compensation	3.37 (0.87)
Metacognitive	4.00 (0.30)
Affective	3.56 (1.10)
Social	3.91 (0.56)
Overall LLS use	3.79 (0.63)

3.4. Students' perceptions about language learning strategies

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 12 students extracted from the sample. These students were chosen based on their reported use of LLS, gender, and grade level. The interviews aimed to extract qualitative data about their perceptions of LLS and their commitment to employing the instructed strategies. Firstly, most participants reported a prominent utilization of cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. Concerning cognitive strategies, common practices included extensive use of sound-based exercises, such as pronunciation and listening comprehension, and the recognition and application of linguistic formulas and patterns. With respect to metacognitive strategies, students frequently mentioned two sets of strategies, namely centering their learning by focusing on receptive skills and arranging and planning their learning by seeking practice opportunities.

Furthermore, students reported employing various social strategies like frequently asking for clarification or correction from teachers or peers and actively cooperating with classmates or individuals proficient in English. While these categories prominently emerged, there were sporadic mentions of other strategy types. Regarding memory strategies, participant 8, a high user of LLS, mentioned that, whenever she learned an unfamiliar word, she tried "to associate it with something in Spanish" to help her remember more effectively. She also referred to a compensation strategy, using circumlocution or synonyms, to make up for her lack of an appropriate repertoire of vocabulary. Participant 2, who reported a high use of strategies, referred to an affective strategy indicating that, when he made mistakes, he discussed his feelings with his parents in pursuance of explanation and improvement.

Secondly, the students who participated in the semi-structured interviews shed light on some aspects concerning LLS instruction. Overall, the participants who reported high use of LLS in the SILL showed an appropriate knowledge of strategies that could help them boost their language learning and reported the use of the strategies their teachers taught them, which highlighted the importance of explicit instruction of LLS. Nevertheless, learners who indicated a lower engagement with LLS also expressed uncertainty regarding the potential contributions of these strategies to their learning progress, indicating that they would only engage with these strategies upon specific teachers' directions, which could have potentially hindered their utilization of such strategies. Challenges such as limited awareness of LLS and diminished motivation for language learning emerged as factors inhibiting the incorporation of LLS, especially in extracurricular activities. Participant 10, a low user of LLS, said that he had not planned to boost his language learning by means of the strategies he had been taught, despite "feeling frustration" when learning English. Another student who reported a low use of LLS, participant 3, mentioned that she "had not thought about using LLS" in her English learning.

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the field of LLS in Colombia. With respect to the first research question, it was found that the students indicated a medium integration of the different types of strategies assessed in the SILL, which is important for creating a comprehensive approach to mastering a foreign language. Notably, the participants reported a heightened adoption of metacognitive and social strategies, a trend further corroborated by insights derived from the semi-structured interviews. Metacognitive strategies empower students to assume more agency over their education by focusing on what works best for them and self-monitoring, whereas social strategies facilitate cooperation with others, receive feedback, and provide the essential cultural understanding for effective communication. On the other hand, affective strategies, which play a pivotal role in maintaining and boosting learners' long-term motivation to learn English, were found to be used to a lesser extent. These findings are congruent with the observations by Bećirović *et al*.

[11], who similarly noted that students at the secondary school level used metacognitive strategies more frequently and the relatively reduced prevalence of affective strategies. Additionally, these findings, corroborated in the quantitative and qualitative components of the study, reinforce the need to boost affective strategies as they make the learning experience more engaging, mitigate negative emotions, and create a positive and supportive learning environment.

Concerning the second research question, the results revealed that the variable gender did not exert a substantial influence on the overall selection of LLS. Although male participants reported slightly higher use of LLS compared to their female counterparts, differences reached statistical significance only in the case of metacognitive strategies. These findings suggest that even though male and female language learners may favor specific types of LLS, gender roles in this context appear to have a limited impact, which minimizes gender-related distinctions in strategy use. These outcomes support the observations by Bećirović *et al*. [11] as their study underscored that, although the overall choice of strategies was not influenced significantly by the variable gender, there were gender-based effects on memory and affective strategies, thereby accentuating the interplay between gender and LLS utilization. Additionally, Gómez *et al*. [25] delineated significant differences in the utilization of memory strategies between genders. Regarding grade level, social and metacognitive strategies were consistently favored by the students surveyed at every level. Differences in patterns of LLS use were visible only in the case of ninth graders, who reported the lowest overall use of LLS, and significant differences were found for their use of cognitive, compensation, and social strategies. This study also sought to identify whether learners' use of LLS was related to their perceived language proficiency. Even though students did not participate in a formal proficiency assessment, their subjective evaluation of their language achievement when compared to other peers in their classes was a good starting point for analyzing the relationships between language proficiency and LLS use. Therefore, the study identified a positive association between higher perceived English proficiency and a greater adoption of learning strategies. Conversely, students who rated their perceived proficiency as low also indicated a lower use of LLS. It is worth attempting to provide a preliminary comparison with findings from other investigations where a positive relationship between LLS and English proficiency was reported [11], [14]–[16].

Research question three encouraged a contrast between students' use of strategies and their teachers' instruction of strategies. Both groups of participants underscored the pivotal role of explicit LLS instruction and its incorporation into language curricula. The surveyed teachers placed substantial emphasis on instructing LLS, whereas learners indicated a medium application of strategies. Concerning this, certain commonalities emerged for the use of metacognitive and social strategies as they are preferred by both groups of participants. In contrast, affective and compensation strategies were noted to be employed less frequently. It is noteworthy that the disparities between teachers and students are linked to the extent to which strategy instruction motivates learners to implement LLS relative to their proficiency levels. In general, students who indicated a high perceived proficiency also acknowledged a high use of LLS, while some students who reported a low use of LLS referred to a lack of awareness of LLS and reduced motivation for language learning. In this regard, it is worth noting that prior research has stressed that the explicit instruction of strategies has been shown to heighten students' autonomy, language skills, awareness of learning strategies, and subsequently enhancement of LLS utilization [19], [21], [23]. However, for students' appropriation of learning strategies and corroboration of the effectiveness of strategy training, devotion of enough time and practice is crucial. Moreover, the incorporation of strategy training could be facilitated through technology, aligning with the primary demands expressed by students during the semi-structured interviews.

Although this investigation has added evidence to the existing knowledge of LLS, there are certainly some considerations to keep in mind. Firstly, convenience sampling was used to select the participants out of a greater population of high schoolers, thus the findings just provided a picture of some aspects concerning LLS research in the Colombian context. Secondly, the participants' use and promotion of LLS were explored with the aid of the SILL, an instrument that has been the obvious choice in exploring the field of LLS despite some criticism that argues, for instance, that it relies on self-reporting LLS choice, which might introduce bias as participants might not always remember or report their strategies with complete accuracy [1], [7]. To compensate for the possible shortcomings, the SILL was translated into the participants' native language, some items were rephrased to enhance comprehensibility, and supplementary qualitative data was collected to enhance the understanding of LLS use and instruction within this context, as suggested by Amerstorfer [31]. Thirdly, this study discussed some aspects concerning teachers' instruction of LLS, yet a more profound exploration of the role of language teachers and their effectiveness in fostering LLS to boost learners' proficiency is needed.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to examine the use and instruction of LLS in the Colombian educational context. Data analysis revealed that the participants leaned toward using social and metacognitive strategies, while the adoption of affective strategies was lower. The study showed that the variable gender did not have a noteworthy influence on the overall use of strategies, but significant differences were found regarding the use of metacognitive strategies between male and female participants. The research uncovered other variances in LLS use among grade levels, with ninth graders reporting lower overall use of strategies, as well as cognitive, compensation, and social strategies. Furthermore, the choice of strategies varied based on students' perceived proficiency in English. There seems to be a gap between teachers' reported instruction of LLS and students' use of LLS, particularly among learners who expressed a lack of awareness about LLS and motivation issues in relation to learning English. Hence, this investigation highlights the importance of explicit LLS instruction, training for both teachers and learners on effective LLS use and promotion, and the incorporation of LLS into the English language curricula. There are certainly various facets of LLS within the Colombian context that are beyond the scope of this investigation. Learning strategies may be influenced by other variables not covered in this study like student characteristics, self-efficacy, language learning beliefs, learning styles, and autonomy. Different results might emerge when studying participants from diverse grade levels and learning environments. Further research should explore other factors associated with LLS by adopting alternative approaches, although it is advisable to consider mixed methods studies to gain a holistic comprehension of LLS. Future inquiries should also encompass longitudinal perspectives, delving into how students' LLS use could impact their everyday learning activities, the effects of consciously employing certain strategies on long-term English proficiency, and the influence of teachers' instructions on students' strategy choices. Regarding the latter, additional research should focus on assessing the significance of teachers' roles and their specific instructional methods for promoting the use of LLS in EFL environments.

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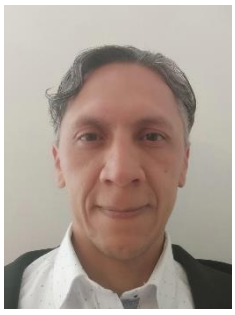

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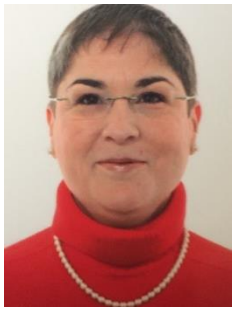

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