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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRAMMAR LEARNING STRATEGIES USE AND GRAMMAR COMPETENCE

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## Abstract

English language students, especially, those in higher learning institutions, should have good grammar competence as they need to produce written and spoken academic tasks which are expected to be grammatically sound. Since learning grammar can be difficult for them, they should be encouraged to employ grammar learning strategies to master grammar. With these strategies, they can understand and learn grammar rules better and apply the correct grammar structures in their academic work. Many studies have examined the students' use of grammar learning strategies at tertiary level, however, the extent of how grammar learning strategies help foster grammar competence is still under explored. Therefore, the present study investigated the relationship between the students' grammar learning strategies use and grammar competence. Another objective of the study was to determine the grammar learning strategies that contributed most to fostering students' grammar competence. The study employed a quantitative research method using a survey design. A 36-item questionnaire was randomly distributed to students who took a grammar course in their first semester of study and 80 students responded to the questionnaire. Grammar competence was determined by looking at the grammar test scores which were obtained at the end of the semester. The findings revealed that there were significant relationships between cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies and grammar competence. Cognitive strategies were found to be contributing most to foster students' grammar competence. With these findings, the students can be encouraged and guided on how to employ grammar learning strategies to improve grammar.

*Keywords:* Grammar competence, grammar learning strategies, grammar test scores

## 1. Introduction

English plays a significant role in the contemporary modern life. However, learning English grammar has always been a challenge for students as grammar is complex which makes it difficult for them to understand. If the students do not have a thorough understanding of grammar, they will make errors whether writing or speaking. Grammar knowledge is the basic framework for language students to form sentences that may be utilised for communicating in English. Thus, if students do not understand how to construct sentences, they will be unable to communicate effectively in English. Employing suitable learning strategies helps to facilitate the learning process and make it more controlled, enjoyable, and effective for students (Alsied et al., 2018). These techniques are called grammar learning strategies.

Pawlak (2018) refined grammar learning strategies based on language learning strategies which were introduced by Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). He classified these strategies into four; cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Cognitive strategy consists of the conscious control of the thinking process and the problem-solving skills with a specific goal to be achieved. It is when the learning and the teaching process involves the thinking process to derive conclusions or understanding of a concept. Cognitive strategy involves the mental abilities of processing information received for problem-solving, understanding, memorizing, and revising (Al Abri et al., 2017). The cognitive strategy under GLS involves the activities done by the students, such as taking notes, repeating concepts verbally and doing exercises, to acquire the grammar concepts (Pawlak, 2018). Metacognition is the state of knowing and comprehending one's own thought process. It is the process of comprehending the mental process to monitor and to evaluate their performance which also involves the self-direction or regulation. It is when a student evaluates the learning strategies used and finds new approaches to enhance his understanding. The meta-cognitive strategy is useful for improvements and innovations of learning styles as the students are able to constantly evaluate their thinking process and understanding ability. This strategy is useful in identifying the students' understanding of their own learning capacities and how it helps to acquire new knowledge. Activities involved in this strategy include focusing on, practicing, and reviewing grammar structures (Azizmohammadi & Barjesteh, 2020; Pawlak, 2018). The affective attitudes may include the act of self-encouraging and self- talk, mood and anxiety level identification, self-reward and deep breathing which will help with overcoming barriers to learning (Zekrati, 2017). Oo (2018) divided the affective strategy into three components that include anxiety lowering, self-encouraging and emotional temperature taking. In GLS, affective strategy functions as encouragement and the solution to the emotional and attitude barrier. Among activities that are under affective strategies are making an effort to relax when having difficulties understanding or using grammar and encouraging oneself in practicing grammar (Pawlak, 2018). Finally, the social strategies involve teacher-student and student-student interactions and cooperations in learning grammar. Asking questions and clarifications in understanding grammar, practicing grammar with peers, and helping others who faced difficulties in understanding grammar are the activities under this strategy (Oo, 2018; Pawlak, 2018).

Grammar acts as a guide to the users of the language on how to construct the sentences to communicate the message effectively and to be understood by the hearer or the receiver of the message. It allows students to recognize different grammatical patterns which include words, sounds, sentence

structures and meaning. Although the context may help people to understand the message, miscommunication may happen if the sentence does not abide the grammatical rules (Amroune & Charik, 2020). Takala (2016) stated that there was a shift from the significance of grammar as the aim of language learning towards strengthening communication skills. However, without correct grammatical forms, one would fail to reach the highest competence level. The idea of putting aside grammar in usage will result in poor language proficiency. Therefore, having little knowledge of grammar will affect the language competence of a student. Students need to have grammar competence to understand the language and how to use it appropriately, especially in an academic context. A student is considered grammatically competent when he can apply the grammatical rules of language in forming sentences and effectively use them in both written and spoken forms (Ismail & Dedi, 2021).

The approaches in teaching grammar in a second language context has always been discussed by linguists and educators alike. There are several common approaches to grammar teaching namely the natural approach, the communicative approach, the deductive approach, the inductive approach, and the eclectic approach. The first one is the natural approach which was introduced in the late 70s and early 80s. The approach is the imitation of the L1 acquisition which emphasizes the use of L2 in daily life and ignores the teaching of grammatical rules. The rationale is that during the L1 acquisition, the speakers are not taught about the grammatical rules to be able to speak the language. Comprehensible input is the essence of this approach (Amiruddin & Jannah, 2021; Dibekulu, 2022). Next is the communication approach which focuses on using the means of interaction. Instead of using the traditional way of learning, which is the structural syllabus, this approach focuses more on the communication activities where every student must participate and contribute. However, once again grammar is not emphasized which risks the accuracy of speaking correctly. The main features of this approach are students can communicate in the targeted language, linguistics structures are taught incidentally, activities are based on real life situations and social context, and teachers take the facilitator role rather than instructor (Dibekulu, 2022; Shirav & Nagai, 2022). The deductive approach stresses presenting the grammatical rules to the students followed by exercises. The exercises allow the students to immediately apply the rules they have just learned. The approach of teaching, explaining, and applying the knowledge is the ordinary way of language teaching that is applied worldwide. Even so, grammar teaching in early stage may not be suitable for all range of ages. The concepts and terminologies may be difficult for the younger students to understand. Meanwhile, the inductive approach requires the students to infer the general rules from the observation of specific instances. This way, the teachers have to propose an extensive number of examples for the students to derive the similarities in structures. This approach is similar to what is known as student-centred learning where the students play a great role in obtaining the knowledge with guidance from the teacher. The drawback to this approach is that the students are bound to make mistakes in deriving the concepts (Amroune & Charik, 2020; Cortez & Genison, 2021; Shirav & Nagai, 2022). Finally, the eclectic approach takes into considerations of previously mentioned ones, and it is a problem-based approach to language teaching that finds a common ground to solve problems encountered by the students. It is a combination of accuracy and eloquence. The structure of the language is taught to the students through a communicative approach which allows the students to learn the grammar naturally.

This approach will benefit the students as the teachers can address the students' different learning styles and needs (Al-Khasawneh, 2022; Cortez & Genison, 2021).

## 2.   Problem Statement

Most studies in the past focused on identifying the grammar learning strategies used by students (Alsied et al., 2018; Azizmohammadi & Barjesteh, 2020; Dawi & Hashim, 2022; Jaruteerapan, 2022). By identifying students' learning strategies, teachers can assist the students to understand grammar rules and structures, which in turn, it will help students approach the task using the strategies that most appropriate for them. Studies also investigated the extent of grammar learning strategies employed by proficient language students (Al Abri et al., 2017; Sukying, 2021; Zekrati, 2017). In a Malaysian context, most studies focused on language learning strategies (Dawi et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2021; Othman et al., 2022; Sani & Ismail, 2021) and not specifically on grammar learning strategies. In fact, the research on their relationship with grammar competence is still under explored. Therefore, this study examined the relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies and grammar competence among students in a Malaysian higher learning institution.

## 3.   Research Questions

The research questions of this study are:
i.     Is there any relationship between grammar learning strategies used by students in a Malaysian public higher learning institution and their grammar competence?
ii.    Which grammar learning strategies contribute most to the students' grammar competence?

## 4.   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies among Malaysian students and their grammar competence. The grammar learning strategies that contribute most to the students' grammar competence are also examined.

## 5.   Research Methods

This study employed a quantitative research method using a survey design. According to Sarangam (2021), the survey design is used in a quantitative study by many researchers as they can collect data in a short period of time. It is also inexpensive, familiar and can be made accessible to a wider group of individuals. The purpose of the study was informed in the introduction of survey. A statement that those who responded to the survey would be considered as voluntarily participating in the study was also included. Therefore, the data gathered were from voluntary participants. The survey was distributed to the total student population of semester 1 which was 120 students. Using a published table by Glenn (1992) as cited in Singh and Masuku (2014), the ideal sample size of this study was 96 with 95% confidence level and 5% margin error. However, only 80 students managed to respond to the survey. Therefore, these students became the participants of the study. The instrument used was a 36-item

questionnaire which was adapted from Pawlak (2018). The response type for these 36 items was a 5-point Likert scale format (1-Strong Disagree; 2-Disagree; 3-Neutral; 4-Agree; 5-Strongly Agree) to measure the level of agreement for each item under the 4 grammar learning strategies. These responses were then analysed in order to answer the research questions. The questionnaire was then converted into google forms and the link was shared with the students using social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. The items of the questionnaire could be considered as valid for they were developed by using Pawlak's (2018) framework, referring to previous studies and consulting other experts. Meanwhile, Cronbach's Alpha was used to analyse the reliability of the items. Table 1 illustrates the values of internal consistency for cognitive strategies (0.869), for metacognitive strategies (0.906), for affective strategies (0.865), for social strategies (0.896) and for all strategies (0.959).

**Table 1.** Cronbach's alpha for individual and all grammar learning strategies

| Strategies | No. of items | Cronbach's alpha |
|---|---|---|
| Cognitive | 10 | 0.869 |
| Metacognitive | 10 | 0.906 |
| Affective | 10 | 0.865 |
| Social | 6 | 0.896 |
| All | 36 | 0.959 |

The values of internal consistency for individual and all grammar learning strategies are above 0.80 which indicate that there is high internal consistency for the items with this specific sample (Taber, 2018). The data gathered were then analysed using Pearson's correlation and stepwise multiple regression. The significance level was set at 0.05. The students' grammar competence was determined by the scores of the grammar test which was administered at the end of the semester.

## 6.   Findings

In answering research question 1, a series of Pearson's correlation analysis was run. The relationship between cognitive strategies and grammar competence is shown in Table 2 below. The finding shows that there is a significant relationship between cognitive learning strategies use and grammar competence, r=0.626, p<0.05. It can be concluded that the more the students use cognitive strategies in learning grammar, the more grammatically competent they are.

**Table 2.** The relationship between cognitive strategies use and grammar competence

|  |  | Grammar competence |
|---|---|---|
|  | Pearson's correlation | 0.626 |
| Cognitive | sig. (2-tailed) | 0.001 |
|  | N | 80 |

Table 3 shows that there is a significant relationship between metacognitive strategies use and grammar competence, r=0.552, p<0.05. It can be concluded that the frequent use of metacognitive strategies in learning grammar fosters grammar competence of the students.

**Table 3.** The relationship between metacognitive strategies use and grammar competence

|  |  | Grammar competence |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Pearson's correlation | 0.552 |
| Metacognitive | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.001 |
|  | N | 80 |

Table 4 reveals that there is a significant relationship between affective strategies use and grammar competence, r=0.497, p<0.05. It can be concluded that the students can be grammatically competent with the use of affective strategies in learning grammar.

**Table 4.** The relationship between affective strategies use and grammar competence

|  |  | Grammar competence |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Pearson's correlation | 0.497 |
| Affective | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.001 |
|  | N | 80 |

Table 5 indicates that there is a significant relationship between social strategies use and grammar competence, r=0.468, p<0.05. It can be concluded that the students who often use social strategies in learning grammar will be more grammatically competent.

**Table 5.** The relationship between social strategies use and grammar competence

|  |  | Grammar competence |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Pearson's correlation | 0.468 |
| Social | sig. (2-tailed) | 0.001 |
|  | N | 80 |

Stepwise multiple regression was run in answering research question 2. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 6, Table 7, Table 8 and Table 9. Table 6 shows a multiple correlation coefficient of .626, thus indicating that approximately 39.2% of the variance in cognitive strategies could be accounted for by the students' grammar competence.

**Table 6.** Model summary

| Model | R | R square | Adjusted R square | Std. error of the estimate |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | 0.626[a] | 0.392 | 0.384 | 3.84092 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), COGNITIVE

At step 1 of analysis, cognitive strategies entered into the regression equation and were significantly related to grammar competence [$F_{(1, 78)}$ = 50.307, p < 0.001] (see Table 7).

**Table 7.** ANOVA[a]

| Model |  | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Regression | 742.165 | 1 | 742.165 | 50.307 | <.001[b] |
|  | Residual | 1150.707 | 78 | 14.753 |  |  |
|  | Total | 1892.872 | 79 |  |  |  |

a. Dependent Variable: FINALTEST

b. Predictors: (Constant), COGNITIVE

Metacognitive strategies (t = 0.608, p > 0.05), affective strategies (t=0.563, p>0.05) and social strategies (t = 0.545, p > 0.05) did not enter into the equation at step 2 of the analysis as shown in Table 8 below.

**Table 8.** Excluded variables[a]

| Model | | Beta In | t | Sig. | Partial Correlation | Collinearity Statistics Tolerance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | METACOGNITIVE | 0.098[b] | 0.608 | 0.545 | 0.069 | 0.304 |
| | AFFECTIVE | 0.074[b] | 0.563 | 0.575 | 0.064 | 0.452 |
| | SOCIAL | 0.067[b] | 0.545 | 0.587 | 0.062 | 0.521 |
| a. Dependent Variable: FINALTEST | | | | | | |

**Table 9.** Coefficients[a]

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients B | Std. Error | Standardized Coefficients Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | (Constant) | 9.881 | 2.210 | | 4.471 | <.001 |
| | COGNITIVE | 4.207 | 0.593 | 0.626 | 7.093 | <.001 |
| a. Dependent Variable: FINALTEST | | | | | | |

Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that cognitive strategies contribute the most to the students' grammar competence as the model presents a regression coefficient of 4.207 related to cognitive strategies. A unit increase in cognitive strategies is associated with a 4.207 unit increase in grammar competence.

## 7. Conclusions

The focus of the present study was to investigate the relationship between grammar learning strategies use and students' grammar competence. The findings revealed that each of the grammar learning strategies, which were cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, had a significant relationship with grammar competence. Students who used grammar learning strategies frequently would foster their grammar competence. These findings were supported by the study done by Azizmohammadi and Barjesteh (2020), and Junaidi and Alfan (2020) who also discovered that grammar learning strategies had positive relationships with grammar competence. However, the findings contradicted Amroune and Charik's (2020) study which discovered that there was no evidence to support any relationship between grammar learning use and grammar competence. Similar contradictory findings were also found in Ismail and Dedi (2021) quasi experimental study which did not yield any significant mean difference in the grammar competence based on grammar learning strategies use. The students' use of various techniques and strategies, attitudes and individual differences might lead to the insignificant findings. It was also discovered that the use of cognitive strategies contributed the most to the grammar competence. Azizmohammadi and Barjesteh (2020) also discovered that cognitive strategies had a large effect size that signified a practical significance in the real world. Their finding also revealed that metacognitive strategies had a practical significance too and it did not support the findings of the present study in which metacognitive, affective and social strategies were not the contributing factors to grammar competence.

The present study has concluded that the grammar learning strategies play an important role in fostering the students' grammar competence. Therefore, the students should be exposed to these strategies so that they can employ the strategies that suit them best to master their grammar. Strategies that deal with cognitive aspects can be useful in making students grammatically competent. The teachers can design lesson plans and activities which encourage the students to use cognitive strategies in learning grammar. Future research using bigger sample size, triangulation methods and multiple sources should be undertaken in further investigating the influence of grammar learning strategies on students' grammar competence.

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