

Students' Experiences of *Strategy-Based Instruction* in an English Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract

Despite extensive instruction in English, many undergraduate English majors in Nigeria continue to experience difficulties developing practical proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. One contributing factor is the limited emphasis on explicit instruction in how to learn and regulate language learning. In response to the curriculum flexibility introduced under Nigeria's *Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards* (CCMAS), a Nigerian university introduced an *English Language Learning Strategies* course to develop students' strategic competence through explicit instruction in cognitive, metacognitive, social, affective, communicative, and self-regulation strategies. Thus, this study explored the experiences of third-year undergraduate students who completed the semester-long course. A qualitative case study design was adopted, with semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 purposively selected students. The interview data were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that students perceived the course as highly beneficial, reporting improvements across listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with particularly outstanding improvement in speaking confidence, reduced language anxiety, strategic awareness, and learner autonomy. Students also reported becoming more purposeful in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning. However, they identified challenges related to managing multiple strategies, limited opportunities for sustained practice, and transferring strategy use to independent learning contexts. The study contributes qualitative evidence on curriculum-integrated strategy-based instruction from a Nigerian university and demonstrates the value of explicit strategy instruction in promoting language proficiency, self-regulated learning, and learner autonomy. The findings suggest that embedding strategy-based instruction across the language curriculum can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical language use in higher education.

Keywords

language learning strategies, strategy-based instruction, English as a second language, higher education, learner autonomy, self-regulated learning.

Introduction

Developing proficiency in English as a second language (ESL) involves more than acquiring grammatical knowledge or being exposed to classroom instruction. It requires learners to actively regulate their learning, select appropriate strategies, and apply them purposefully across different communicative situations. Consequently, *Language Learning Strategies* (LLSs) have become a central construct in second language acquisition research because they enable learners to process, monitor, and evaluate language learning more effectively (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 2017; Griffiths & Oxford, 2014). Recent scholarship further conceptualises LLSs within *Self-Regulated Learning* (SRL). It views strategy use as an interaction of

cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, social, and affective processes that promote learner autonomy and sustained language development (Oxford, 2017; Teng & Zhang, 2020).

The growing emphasis on learner-centred pedagogy has shifted attention from what teachers teach to how learners learn. Rather than treating learners as passive recipients of knowledge, contemporary approaches recognise them as active participants who consciously plan, monitor, evaluate, and adapt their learning. Within this perspective, *Strategy-Based Instruction* (SBI) has emerged as an important pedagogical approach that integrates explicit instruction in language learning strategies with language content, enabling learners to become more autonomous, reflective, and effective language users (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 2017).

Recent research continues to demonstrate the relevance of SBI and self-regulated learning approaches in second and foreign language education. Chen et al. (2023), for example, identified explicit strategy instruction, metacognitive development, and learner engagement as important features of successful SBI implementation. Similarly, Zhang and Zou (2022), in a review of 58 studies, found that self-regulated language learning strategies were associated with benefits across language skills and affective outcomes, while emphasising the importance of explicit teacher support. Chen (2022) further demonstrated through a meta-analysis that self-regulated learning interventions produced positive effects on second language achievement, strategy use, and self-efficacy. Recent intervention studies have likewise shown that metacognitive strategy instruction can enhance language performance and learner-related outcomes (Teng, 2022; Khosravi et al., 2023; Martelletti et al., 2023). Effective SBI therefore typically involves raising learners' awareness of strategies, explicit teacher modelling, guided and repeated practice, opportunities for self-evaluation, and gradual transfer of responsibility to learners as they apply strategies to new learning tasks (Chen et al., 2023; Zhang & Zou, 2022).

Language Learning Strategies and Self-Regulated Learning

Language learning strategies (LLSs) have been a central focus of second language acquisition (SLA) research for over four decades because they explain how learners actively facilitate language learning rather than merely receiving instruction. Early research conceptualised LLSs as deliberate actions, behaviours, or techniques that learners employ to improve second language acquisition (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). These strategies were commonly classified into cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective categories, each supporting different aspects of language learning. Cognitive strategies facilitate information processing, metacognitive strategies enable learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, while social and affective strategies promote interaction, motivation, and emotional regulation (Oxford, 1990).

Although these classifications established an important foundation for strategy research, contemporary scholarship argues that language learning strategies should not be viewed as isolated techniques or stable learner traits. Instead, strategy use is increasingly recognised as dynamic, context-dependent, and closely intertwined with learners' capacity for self-regulation (Oxford, 2017; Rose et al., 2018). This shift reflects a broader movement from asking what strategies learners use to understanding how they regulate their learning through strategic behaviour.

This reconceptualization is reflected in the growing influence of *Self-Regulated Learning* (SRL) theory. Oxford's (2017) *Strategic Self-Regulation* (S²R) Model extends earlier classifications by integrating cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, emotional, and social regulation into a unified framework for language learning. Similarly, Teng and Zhang (2020) argue that effective strategy use depends on learners' ability to regulate cognition, motivation, and behaviour throughout the learning process. Within this perspective, communication and self-regulation strategies complement traditional cognitive and metacognitive strategies by enabling learners to adapt strategically to different learning contexts and communicative demands. Consequently, successful language learning is increasingly understood as the product of coordinated strategic, motivational, and affective regulation rather than the use of isolated learning techniques.

Strategy-Based Instruction and Language Development

The growing emphasis on self-regulated learning has led to increased interest in Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI), an instructional approach that explicitly teaches learners how to use language learning strategies alongside language content. Rather than assuming that learners naturally acquire effective learning strategies, SBI seeks to develop strategic awareness through explicit explanation, teacher modelling, guided practice, reflection, and the gradual transfer of responsibility to learners (Chamot, 2005; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Oxford, 1990).

A substantial body of research now supports the effectiveness of SBI in promoting language development. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that explicit strategy instruction has a significant positive effect on second language learning across diverse educational contexts (Plonsky, 2011). Similarly, Shirvan et al. (2016) found that strategy-based instruction produces moderate to large improvements in English language learning, particularly when instruction is explicit, sustained over time, and implemented with learners beyond the elementary level. These findings suggest that strategy instruction is most effective when learners are given sufficient opportunities to practise, reflect on, and transfer strategies to new learning situations.

Empirical studies have likewise demonstrated that SBI enhances multiple dimensions of language learning. Habók and Magyar (2018) reported improvements in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition following explicit strategy instruction, while Teng (2022) found that self-regulated strategy instruction significantly improved students' writing performance, metacognitive awareness, and self-regulation. A systematic review by Rose et al. (2018) further concluded that strategy instruction contributes to greater learner engagement, autonomy, and strategic competence across a range of language learning contexts. Beyond measurable gains in proficiency, learners who receive explicit strategy instruction consistently report increased confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy, enabling them to approach language tasks more systematically and persist in challenging learning situations (Griffiths, 2018; Oxford, 2017). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that SBI supports the integrated development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing by equipping learners with transferable strategies that bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and authentic language use.

Despite these encouraging findings, important gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research has focused on short-term interventions, individual language skills, or quantitative evaluations of strategy use (Plonsky, 2011; Rose et al., 2018). Comparatively few studies have examined strategy instruction as a semester-long, curriculum-integrated university course, particularly within English departments where students are expected to develop advanced communicative competence. Moreover, relatively little qualitative research has explored how learners experience strategy-based instruction, how they transfer strategies across language skills, and what challenges they encounter during sustained implementation.

These gaps are particularly relevant in higher education contexts undergoing curriculum reform. The flexibility introduced through Nigeria's *Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards* (CCMAS) provides opportunities for universities to incorporate learner-centred, strategy-based courses that address persistent challenges in students' practical language proficiency. However, the success of such curricular innovations depends not only on measurable improvements in language performance but also on students' experiences, perceptions, and sustained engagement with strategic learning. Understanding these experiences is therefore essential for evaluating the pedagogical value of strategy-based instruction and informing the design of future language curricula.

Evidence supporting SBI has become increasingly robust. A meta-analysis of 26 experimental studies reported that strategy-based instruction produced moderate to large positive effects on English language learning, particularly when instruction was explicit, sustained over time, and implemented with learners beyond the elementary level (Shirvan et al., 2016). Similarly, a comprehensive meta-analysis by Plonsky (2011) concluded that strategy instruction has a significant positive effect on second language learning across a wide range of instructional contexts. These syntheses demonstrate that SBI contributes

to improvements in overall language proficiency, reading comprehension, writing, listening, vocabulary development, oral communication, and learners' strategic competence (Plonsky, 2011; Shirvan et al., 2016). Individual intervention studies likewise show that explicit strategy instruction enhances learners' use of cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies while improving self-regulation, confidence, motivation, and learner autonomy (Chamot, 2005; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009; Nguyen & Gu, 2013). More recent studies further suggest that metacognitive strategy use is consistently associated with higher levels of English language proficiency and more effective independent learning (Teng, 2022; Teng & Zhang, 2020).

Despite this growing body of evidence, important gaps remain. Much of the existing literature has examined short-term experimental interventions, focused on individual language skills such as reading, writing, vocabulary, or speaking, or relied primarily on quantitative survey designs (Plonsky, 2011; Rose et al., 2018; Shirvan et al., 2016). Comparatively little attention has been paid to strategy instruction implemented as a semester-long, credit-bearing university course, particularly within English departments where students are expected to attain advanced language proficiency. Furthermore, qualitative investigations exploring students' experiences of curriculum-integrated strategy instruction remain relatively scarce, especially within sub-Saharan African higher education contexts.

These gaps are particularly relevant in Nigeria. English departments traditionally devote considerable attention to descriptive aspects of language, including grammar, phonology, semantics, stylistics, and literary studies. While these courses provide important disciplinary knowledge, they often offer limited explicit guidance on how students can develop practical proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing through strategic learning. Consequently, many undergraduates possess substantial theoretical knowledge of English but continue to experience difficulties communicating effectively, producing well-organised academic writing, and engaging independently with complex academic texts.

Recent reforms introduced through the National Universities Commission's *Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards* (CCMAS) provide universities with greater flexibility to develop institution-specific courses that address contextual needs and emerging disciplinary priorities (National Universities Commission, 2022). Leveraging this opportunity, the Department of English at the university introduced a new course called “*English Language Learning Strategies*”. The course provides explicit instruction in cognitive, metacognitive, social, affective, communicative, and self-regulation strategies while demonstrating how these strategies can be applied across listening, speaking, reading, and writing through guided practice and reflective learning.

Understanding how students experience such an innovation is important because the effectiveness of strategy instruction cannot be evaluated solely through proficiency scores. Students' perceptions provide valuable insights into how they interpret, adopt, transfer, and sustain strategy use, as well as the challenges they encounter during the learning process. Such evidence is particularly valuable in contexts where strategy-based instruction is being institutionalised as part of curriculum reform and where learner-centred pedagogies remain underexplored.

Against this background, this study explores the experiences and perceptions of third-year undergraduate students who completed the English Language Learning Strategies course at a Nigerian university. Specifically, it examines students' perceptions of the course, their perceived improvements across the four language skills, and the challenges they encountered while applying language learning strategies. Providing qualitative evidence from a curriculum-integrated strategy course within a Nigerian university enables the study to extend the growing literature on strategy-based instruction and offers insights for the design of learner-centred language curricula in higher education. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive the effectiveness of the English Language Learning Strategies course?
2. What improvements do students perceive in their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills after completing the course?
3. What challenges do students encounter in learning and applying language learning strategies?

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore students' experiences and perceptions of a newly introduced English Language Learning Strategies course. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to gain in-depth insights into students' reflections, attitudes, and lived experiences rather than to measure achievement quantitatively. The case study design allowed for a detailed examination of a specific instructional intervention within its real-life educational context.

Participants

The participants comprised 53 third-year undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of English during the 2024/2025 academic session. Their ages ranged between 22 and 26 years. All participants were English majors who had received formal instruction in English language and literature courses throughout their academic program. However, none had previously taken a dedicated course focused explicitly on language learning strategies or strategy-based instruction. From the total population of 53 students, 25 participants were purposively selected for interviews. The selection was based on their willingness to participate and share detailed reflections about their learning experiences. Purposive sampling was considered suitable for this study because it enabled the researcher to obtain rich, information-dense accounts from participants who had participated in the course and were able to articulate their experiences.

Course Description

The English Language Learning Strategies course was introduced as a one-semester course within the flexible curriculum framework enabled by the National Universities Commission Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS). As part of the university's 30% institutional curriculum component, the course was designed to address persistent challenges faced by undergraduate English major students in developing practical proficiency across the four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The course provided explicit, systematic instruction in a broad range of language learning strategies, including cognitive, metacognitive, social, affective, communicative, and self-regulation strategies. Cognitive strategies focused on processes such as summarising, note-taking, inferencing, elaboration, and contextual guessing. Metacognitive strategies emphasised planning, goal-setting, monitoring comprehension, and self-evaluation. Social and communicative strategies encouraged interaction through peer collaboration, discussion, clarification, and feedback exchange. Affective strategies addressed learners' emotions by promoting confidence, anxiety management, and motivation, while self-regulation strategies focused on time management, sustained attention, emotional control, and independent learning. Classroom activities were structured to demonstrate how each strategy could be applied across the four language skills. These included guided reading comprehension tasks, listening activities using authentic materials, structured speaking exercises, collaborative discussions, and academic writing assignments. Each activity involved explicit modelling of strategy use, scaffolded practice, and opportunities for reflection.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted at the end of the semester following the completion of the English Language Learning Strategies course. This timing allowed participants to reflect holistically on their learning experiences and the impact of the course on their language development. The interviews were designed to elicit in-depth insights into students' perceptions of the course, their awareness and application of various learning strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, social, affective, communicative, and self-regulation), perceived improvements across the four language skills, and challenges encountered during the learning process. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across participants while allowing sufficient flexibility for probing, clarification, and the exploration of emergent ideas. The guide included open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on how they applied

specific strategies in listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks. All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes each. Participation was voluntary, and ethical standards were strictly observed, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and would not affect their academic standing.

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic and iterative process consistent with qualitative research practices. The analysis began with data familiarization, during which the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to gain an overall understanding of participants' responses. This was followed by initial coding, where meaningful units of data were identified and labelled. Both deductive and inductive coding approaches were employed: some codes were informed by the study's focus on strategy use and language skills, while others emerged directly from participants' accounts. The codes were then examined for patterns and grouped into broader thematic categories. Key themes that emerged included perceived benefits of the course, improvements in specific language skills, development of learner autonomy and self-regulation, and challenges related to strategy selection and sustained application. These themes were refined through continuous comparison across transcripts to ensure coherence, consistency, and depth of interpretation.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, themes were cross-checked against the data to ensure they accurately represented participants' perspectives. The final themes were then interpreted in relation to the study's objectives and situated within existing literature on strategy-based instruction and Self-Regulated Learning.

Findings

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed two predominant themes: (1) Positive Perceptions and Perceived Benefits and (2) Challenges in Strategy Use and Learning. These themes capture students' experiences of the English Language Learning Strategies course and provide insights into how explicit strategy instruction influenced their language development. Each theme is supported by illustrative excerpts from participants and interpreted to highlight underlying patterns.

Positive Perceptions and Perceived Benefits

Participants overwhelmingly reported positive experiences with the course. They emphasized it helped in improving their language proficiency, increasing confidence, and heightening awareness of effective learning strategies. Three key sub-themes emerged within this category: improved language skills, increased confidence and motivation, and awareness and purposeful use of learning strategies.

Improved Language Skills

A dominant finding from the study is that students perceived significant improvement in their core English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, speaking emerged as the most frequently reported area of initial difficulty, largely due to anxiety, fear of error, and low self-confidence. This suggests that affective barriers, rather than purely linguistic limitations, were a major constraint on oral performance prior to the intervention. For example, a participant explained that: "Prior to this course, I had challenges speaking before people, even my classmates." This excerpt reflects a strong sense of speaking-related anxiety and social inhibition. The student's difficulty is not only linguistic but also interpersonal, indicating fear of negative evaluation even within a familiar peer group. It suggests that prior instruction may not have sufficiently addressed communicative confidence or provided safe speaking opportunities. Another participant added that "I always had a problem with speaking anxiety when I was to speak English." This response highlights generalized speaking anxiety in English, pointing to a persistent affective filter that interfered with oral communication. The repetition of "always" signals that the issue was chronic rather

than situational. This emphasises the need for instructional strategies that reduce anxiety and promote gradual exposure to speaking tasks.

Another participant also shared a similar experience “Before this course, I used to be very afraid of speaking in class even when I knew the answer. My friends used to think that I didn’t know anything.” This reveals a more complex relationship between knowledge, performance, and peer perception. The student possessed content knowledge but was unable to express it due to fear, which led to misjudgement by peers. This emphasises how silence in language classrooms can be misinterpreted as lack of competence, and it highlights the course’s role in bridging the gap between cognitive understanding and oral expression. Generally, these responses suggest that the course contributed in reducing speaking anxiety and improving learners’ communicative confidence. The improvement observed is not limited to linguistic gains but also includes affective development, particularly enhanced self-efficacy, reduced fear of negative evaluation, and increased willingness to participate in spoken English activities.

Improvements were also evident in reading comprehension. One participant noted: “Before this course, I struggled to understand complex texts, but now I can identify key ideas and summarize passages more confidently.” (Participant 7). This reflects the effective use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as summarizing, inferencing, and monitoring in reading comprehension. The ability to identify main ideas and synthesize information indicates a shift from passive reading to more strategic and purposeful engagement with texts. Similarly, students reported enhanced writing skills, particularly in organizing ideas and structuring academic texts: “I now know how to organise my ideas when writing essays. I now know how to plan my paragraphs and support my arguments clearly.” (Participant 14). This improvement suggests that students internalised key strategies such as planning, outlining, drafting, and revising. The development of these skills points to increased metacognitive awareness and greater control over the writing process, which are essential for academic success in higher education.

Listening comprehension was also positively affected. As one participant explained: “I am more confident speaking in class and can understand listening tasks better because I know how to focus and take notes effectively.” (Participant 3) This response highlights the role of strategy instruction in enhancing real-time language processing. Through the application of strategies such as focused attention and note-taking, students were better able to manage incoming information, thereby improving both comprehension and participation. The integration of listening and speaking skills further demonstrates the effectiveness of teaching strategies across multiple language domains.

Increased Confidence and Motivation

Beyond observable improvements in language skills, students consistently reported enhanced self-confidence and increased motivation to engage with English learning tasks. Many participants described a shift from passive, uncertain learning to a more active and self-directed approach. For example, one participant noted: “I now know how to plan my study and use strategies that make learning English easier. I feel more in control of my learning.” (Participant 11). This response reflects a clear transition toward Self-Regulated Learning. The student’s sense of control suggests that strategy instruction enabled them to take ownership of their learning process through planning and strategic action. This perceived control is closely associated with increased intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement.

Another participant emphasised the role of confidence in classroom participation: “Before, I was not confident to contribute in class, but now I try to speak because I have strategies to help me organize my thoughts.” This excerpt shows the connection between cognitive and affective development. The availability of strategies for organising ideas appears to reduce uncertainty and fear of making mistakes, which eventually encourage active participation. In this case, increased willingness to communicate is a key indicator of the increase in confidence. It reflects the practical impact of strategy instruction on learners’ communicative competence. A third participant linked motivation to a clearer sense of purpose in learning: “Now when I am reading or listening, I have a purpose. I don’t just read or listen; I try to understand and use strategies.” This statement also demonstrates a shift from surface-level engagement to purposeful and

strategic learning. The student demonstrates heightened metacognitive awareness by recognising the importance of intentionality in learning tasks. Such awareness not only improves comprehension but also reinforces motivation, as learners begin to see tangible results from their efforts. Finally, these responses suggest that the course contributed significantly to students' affective development by enhancing confidence, increasing motivation, and promoting a sense of agency. These factors are essential for long-term language development, as they influence learners' persistence, engagement, and willingness to apply strategies beyond the classroom.

Awareness and Purposeful Use of Learning Strategies

Another key outcome reported by participants was increased awareness of language learning strategies and their ability to apply them purposefully across different tasks. Students demonstrated not only familiarity with a range of strategies but also an emerging ability to select and adapt them based on specific learning contexts. One participant explained: "I have learned which strategies work best for me; like summarizing when reading or rehearsing before speaking; and I can apply them in different situations." (Participant 19). This shows a high level of metacognitive awareness, as the student is able to evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies and make informed choices about their use. The ability to transfer strategies across tasks indicates developing strategic competence, which is essential for independent and lifelong learning. Another participant highlighted how strategy awareness improved task engagement: "Before, I just did tasks without thinking, but now I ask myself what strategy I should use before I start." This excerpt illustrates a shift from unreflective to deliberate learning. The student demonstrates planning and decision-making processes which are associated with Self-Regulated Learning. Such intentionality suggests that learners are no longer passive recipients of instruction but active participants who approach tasks with clear strategic goals.

A third participant emphasized flexibility in strategy use: "Sometimes one strategy does not work, so I try another one. Now I know I have different options depending on the task." This statement shows the development of adaptive expertise. The student's willingness to modify strategies when faced with difficulty reflects both cognitive flexibility and resilience. This adaptability is a critical component of effective language learning, as it enables learners to respond to diverse linguistic demands and challenges. Generally, the findings of this theme indicate that the course fostered not only awareness of learning strategies but also their purposeful and flexible application. Through the development of their ability to select, evaluate, and adapt strategies, the students became more reflective and strategic learners, better equipped to manage their own language development beyond the classroom.

Challenges Faced

Despite the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the course, the participants also reported several challenges in adopting and sustaining the use of multiple learning strategies. These challenges highlight important pedagogical considerations for the implementation of strategy-based instruction. Three key sub-themes emerged:

Managing Multiple Strategies

A recurring challenge among participants was the difficulty of coordinating and applying multiple strategies simultaneously, particularly during complex language tasks such as reading extended texts or writing essays. One participant noted: "Sometimes I forget which strategy to use first, and it becomes confusing when reading long texts or preparing an essay." (Participant 5). This points to the cognitive demands associated with strategy integration. Students may understand individual strategies. However, sequencing and combining them requires higher-order planning and monitoring skills, which may not yet be fully developed. Another participant expressed a similar concern: "There are many strategies, and sometimes I mix them up or don't know which one is most appropriate for the task." This also shows the challenge of strategic

selection. The student's uncertainty suggests that although awareness has increased, the ability to match strategies to specific tasks remains a developing skill and requires more guided practice and modelling.

A third participant added that "When I try to use many strategies at once, I get confused and end up not using any of them well." This indicates an issue of cognitive overload, where the simultaneous application of multiple strategies overwhelms the learner's processing capacity. It suggests the need for more gradual scaffolding, where strategies are introduced and practiced incrementally before being integrated. Overall, these responses indicate that while exposure to a range of strategies is beneficial, effective instruction must also support students in organising, prioritising, and integrating these strategies in manageable ways.

Time Constraints for Practice

Another major challenge reported by participants was the limited time available for consistent practice, particularly given competing academic demands. For instance, one participant explained: "I want to use the strategies more, but with assignments and other courses, I don't always have enough time to practice." (Participant 22). This shows a gap between students' motivation and their capacity to engage in sustained practice. The students recognise the value of the strategies; however, time constraints limit their ability to internalise and automate them.

Another participant stated: "We learn the strategies in class, but after class there is little time to practice them deeply." This suggests that strategy acquisition requires more than classroom exposure; it depends on repeated application in varied contexts. The lack of sufficient practice opportunities may slow down the transition from conscious use to automaticity. A third participant noted: "Sometimes I focus more on completing assignments than on applying the strategies we learned." This indicates a tension between performance-oriented and process-oriented learning. When students prioritize task completion over strategic engagement, the long-term benefits of strategy instruction may be reduced. Thus, these findings show the importance of aligning course design with realistic student workloads and embedding opportunities for strategy practice within regular course activities.

Independent Application Outside Class

Participants also reported difficulties transferring strategy use from guided classroom contexts to independent study environments. One participant observed: "I understand how to use strategies in class, but sometimes I struggle to apply them when studying alone at home." (Participant 16). This indicates a gap between supported and autonomous learning. While students can apply strategies with teacher guidance, independent application requires stronger self-monitoring and self-regulation skills. Another participant shared: "When the lecturer explains it, I can use the strategy, but when I am alone, I forget or don't know how to start." This also suggests that students may rely heavily on external scaffolding and may not yet have fully internalized the strategies. The difficulty in initiating strategy use independently points to the need for gradual release of responsibility in instruction. Finally, a participant stated: "Outside the classroom, I sometimes go back to my old way of studying because it feels easier." This reflects the persistence of habitual learning behaviours. Even when new strategies are introduced, learners may revert to familiar practices unless sustained support and reinforcement are provided. These responses show the challenge of transferring strategy use beyond the classroom. They emphasise the importance of developing Self-Regulated Learning. Thus, show that supporting students in developing autonomy requires continuous practice, reflection, and reinforcement to ensure that strategies become embedded in their independent learning routines.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the English Language Learning Strategies course positively influenced students' language learning by enhancing not only their perceived proficiency across the four language skills but also their strategic awareness, confidence, and learner autonomy. These findings reinforce the view that

successful language learning depends not only on exposure to language input but also on learners' ability to regulate their learning through the deliberate and flexible use of appropriate strategies (Oxford, 2017; Teng & Zhang, 2020). By explicitly teaching students how to approach listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks strategically, the course shifted the focus from learning about English to learning how to learn English effectively.

The reported improvements in speaking confidence, reading comprehension, writing organisation, and listening comprehension support previous research demonstrating that Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) promotes both language proficiency and strategic competence (Habók & Magyar, 2018; Plonsky, 2011; Shirvan et al., 2016). Students attributed these gains to the conscious application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as planning, note-taking, summarising, self-monitoring, and reflection. This finding is consistent with Chamot and O'Malley's (1994) argument that explicit strategy instruction enables learners to become active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of instruction.

The findings also provide empirical support for Oxford's (2017) *Strategic Self-Regulation (S²R) Model*. Students described not only using learning strategies but also selecting, monitoring, evaluating, and adapting them to different language tasks. Such behaviours reflect the interaction of cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and affective regulation proposed by the S²R framework. Similarly, Teng and Zhang (2020) argue that effective strategy use is inseparable from self-regulated learning because learners must continuously regulate their cognition, motivation, and behaviour to achieve learning goals. The increased confidence and willingness to participate reported by many participants further suggest that affective regulation played an important role in reducing speaking anxiety and encouraging active engagement with language learning.

An equally important finding is the development of learner autonomy. Participants reported becoming more purposeful in planning their study, monitoring their progress, and evaluating the effectiveness of different strategies. Rather than relying exclusively on teacher guidance, they increasingly assumed responsibility for their own learning by selecting strategies that best suited particular tasks. This shift from teacher dependence to strategic independence supports Griffiths's (2018) assertion that successful language learners are distinguished not by the number of strategies they know but by their ability to use them flexibly and appropriately. It also reinforces Rose et al.'s (2018) conclusion that contemporary language learning strategy research should be viewed within the broader framework of self-regulated learning rather than as isolated strategy use.

The findings are particularly significant within the Nigerian higher education context, where English language instruction has traditionally emphasised linguistic knowledge, including grammar, phonology, semantics, and literary analysis, with comparatively less emphasis on strategic language learning. The introduction of an *English Language Learning Strategies* course under the flexibility provided by the *Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS)* represents an important pedagogical innovation that complements disciplinary knowledge with explicit instruction on how language skills can be developed. The positive experiences reported by participants suggest that such curriculum innovations can contribute to bridging the longstanding gap between theoretical knowledge and practical communicative competence.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also identified several challenges that have important pedagogical implications. Students reported difficulty managing multiple strategies simultaneously, limited opportunities for sustained practice, and challenges transferring strategy use from guided classroom activities to independent learning. These findings suggest that developing strategic competence is a gradual process that requires continuous practice and support. The difficulty of coordinating multiple strategies reflects the cognitive demands associated with self-regulated learning, particularly for learners who are still developing metacognitive control. This observation is consistent with Habók and Magyar (2018), who argue that strategy instruction should be carefully scaffolded to prevent cognitive overload and allow learners to internalise strategies progressively.

Similarly, limited time for practice and difficulty transferring strategies beyond the classroom indicate that one semester of instruction may not be sufficient for learners to fully internalise strategic

behaviours. Rose et al. (2018) argue that learners require repeated opportunities to apply, evaluate, and adapt strategies across different contexts before they become autonomous users. These findings therefore highlight the importance of embedding strategy instruction throughout the curriculum rather than restricting it to a single course. Integrating reflective journals, collaborative learning, guided self-assessment, and strategy-focused tasks across language courses may facilitate the gradual transfer of strategic learning to independent study.

Overall, this study contributes both theoretically and practically to the growing literature on *Strategy-Based Instruction*. Theoretically, it extends evidence supporting Oxford's (2017) *Strategic Self-Regulation* model by demonstrating how cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and affective regulation operate within a semester-long, curriculum-integrated strategy course. Practically, it provides qualitative evidence from a Nigerian university context, an area that remains underrepresented in language learning strategy research. By foregrounding students' experiences and perceptions, the study demonstrates that explicit strategy instruction can enhance not only language proficiency but also learner autonomy, confidence, and self-regulation, thereby supporting the broader goal of developing independent and lifelong language learners.

Conclusion

This study examined third-year undergraduate students' experiences of an English Language Learning Strategies course and its impact on their language development. The findings indicate that students perceived the course positively, reporting improvements across listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with particularly notable gains in speaking confidence and reduced anxiety. This highlights the course's effectiveness in addressing both linguistic competence and affective barriers. Students also demonstrated increased strategic awareness and self-regulation, especially in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning, reflecting a shift toward greater learner autonomy. However, challenges such as difficulty applying multiple strategies, limited practice time, and transferring strategies to independent contexts were identified. The study contributes qualitative evidence from a Nigerian ESL context, emphasizing the value of explicit strategy instruction in enhancing both communicative competence and autonomous learning. Despite limitations related to scope and reliance on self-reported data, the findings suggest that well-structured, strategy-based courses can significantly improve language learning outcomes when supported by sustained practice and curriculum integration.

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